

Poland: 21 die in homeless shelter fire

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A fire at a homeless shelter in the small Polish town of Kamien Pomorski last Sunday night killed 21 people and left many other residents badly injured. Kamien Pomorski is situated in the northwest of Poland, close to the border with Germany. The three-storey building—housing 77 homeless people, including women and children—was turned into a charred skeleton by the blaze, which rapidly engulfed the hostel.

In the panic, residents jumped down into the courtyard and parents threw their children from windows to escape the blaze. Twenty people were injured, many suffering from broken bones and internal injuries. Identification of the dead has been made more difficult by the intensity of the blaze, which left many bodies unidentifiable.

Two residents, including an eight-month-old baby, were being treated for burns in the nearby town of Gryfice. Days after the blaze, the exact number of victims has been difficult to determine and a number of those registered in the building had still not been accounted for.

Eyewitnesses described the horrifying scene as the blaze spread. One resident of the town who lived across from the hostel told the newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*: “People wrapped children in blankets and cast them from the windows. Firemen caught them in flight. The adults jumped out next.”

Another witness told TVN24 television: “There was no time. It shot up in flames like a torch. People jumped out the windows to survive. I saw a 70-year-old man jump out and survive.”

Investigators at the scene did not rule out an arson attack, but noted that the hostel had experienced two fires previously caused by inhabitants attempting to warm themselves with electric heaters.

The hostel in Kamien Pomorski was originally built to accommodate workers in the region’s gas fields. Such housing units for workers typically provided the proverbial roof over their heads with very little in the way of facilities. Ownership of the building was transferred to the local government a few years ago, which then made

the building available to homeless persons in the region.

One survivor of the latest blaze, Emilia Staniszevska, said that no renovation or changes had been made when the building was turned into a shelter. She told TVN24 television: “I went from one official to another with letters saying the house has asbestos elements and is not safe to live in, but no one did anything to change that.”

According to the spokesman for the Supreme Auditing Chamber, which monitors adherence to regulations, local construction inspectors had been negligent and had allowed people to live in the building despite a number of building and safety code violations.

The fire is Poland’s deadliest case since October 1980, when 55 people died following a blaze at a psychiatric hospital in Gorna Grupa in central Poland.

Homelessness in Poland

The exact number of homeless persons in Poland is difficult to assess, with figures differing wildly. According to a report given by the director of Caritas of Kielce in 2006, the problem of homelessness in Poland was growing. The report estimated the total homeless figure at between 60,000 and 70,000 and stated that this number was growing by several thousand a year.

According to Stanislaw Slowik from the Caritas of Kielce: “Half of this total were staying at facilities for the homeless, while the other half reside in garden sheds, heating ducts or staircases”.

A 2008 report in the *Krowow Post*, however, speaks of 300,000 homeless facing enormous difficulties. This total includes many mentally ill persons, elderly persons unable to fend for themselves and persons dependent on alcohol and drugs. It includes as well a large number of women, including unmarried women or mothers, rejected by their families and the state in a country where the Catholic Church still plays a commanding role.

While officially the Polish authorities and local governments are responsible for the plight of the homeless, the reality is that only a third of the homeless are housed in hostels controlled by local governments. The remainder of hostels for the homeless in Poland are run by non-governmental organisations and the Church. At the same time, the latest blaze in Kamien Pomorski makes clear that local authorities are quite prepared to turn a blind eye to the conditions that prevail in their hostels.

The problem of homelessness in Poland has grown dramatically since the restoration of capitalism two decades ago. The widespread contempt and neglect of the homeless by Polish authorities was expressed most graphically by a case last year involving a number of Polish doctors and nurses who were accused of abusing homeless people by subjecting them to trials for a vaccine to the H5N1 bird-flu virus.

The medical experiments, involving an untested vaccine for the highly-contagious virus, were conducted on an estimated 350 homeless and poor people in the northern town of Grudziadz. The director of one Grudziadz homeless hostel reported that 21 people from his centre had died following the trials.

While precise figures are difficult to obtain, it can only be expected that the numbers of homeless in Poland will rise significantly as the current economic and financial crisis deepens. In recent years, several million young Poles have left the country to work abroad. As joblessness now rises across the European continent many are returning home with empty pockets and to destitute conditions.

According to figures released at the start of this year by a British homeless person's charity, up to 20,000 Polish citizens who had gone to Britain looking for work were now homeless in central London. Following a vicious campaign in the British media directed against the homeless, British authorities have stepped up their efforts to "encourage" Poles and other East European citizens to return to their countries of origin—under conditions where it is clear they will only add to the ballooning number of homeless in their own states.

The appalling conditions confronting homeless persons in Poland can only be bettered by large-scale investment aimed at creating jobs and improving the country's depleted welfare and health systems. The latest economic data, which predicts a rapid slowdown in Poland's economic growth this year, indicates that the government will instead increase its attacks on the country's social

network.

The Polish government led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk recently applied for a €15 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund to prop up its ailing economy and national currency, the zloty, which has fallen considerably in value. The Polish economy is experiencing a crash in exports and investment, which has hit its automotive, construction and steel industries hard.

The €15 billion from the IMF is seen by Tusk as a necessary credit line to enable his government to realize its aim of joining the Euro community of states by 2012. The main criteria for entry to the Eurozone are a stable federal budget. Under conditions where tax revenues are falling due to the economic crisis, the pressure will once again be on the Tusk government to make major savings and cuts in the country's welfare budget.

According to Kazimierz Marcinkiewicz, the former Polish prime minister and current employee of Goldman Sachs investment bank, now is the best time to undertake "unpopular reforms".

In an interview published in the April 15 edition of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Marcinkiewicz was asked, "Is the crisis a good time for unpopular reforms? Or maybe in the face of the growing unemployment it is better not to depress people even more by taking away their pensions and retirement benefits or the cheap social insurance for farmers?"

Marcinkiewicz replied: "The crisis is an ideal moment to carry out reforms.... Some countries actually benefit from the crisis, because they were able to take difficult decisions, which will result in good economic growth. Poland can also be such a country, as long as the PO (Civic Platform) proves to be brave, and people will believe Donald Tusk is a true leader."



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