

India: Official corruption and negligence tied to 34 deaths in firecracker explosion

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Thirty-four people perished last Friday evening as the result of a massive explosion and fire at a firecracker store and warehouse in Pallipattu, a village that lies in Tiruvallur district some 125 kilometres west of Chennai, the capital of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The fire also left at least 10 others with life-threatening burns.

Virtually all the dead were mutilated and charred beyond recognition.

Most of the victims were poor people who had flocked to the store-warehouse from nearby villages to purchase firecrackers at a 40 percent discount on the eve of the Hindu festival of light, Diwali. Many of them hailed from the Chittoor district of the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh.

The families of the victims and other local people are adamant that this tragedy could have been averted had the state administration and police officials enforced existing regulations governing the sale of fireworks. Allegedly in return for handsome “mamool” or payoffs, local officials turned a blind eye to the fact that the store did not have the requisite license under the Explosives Act and was violating the stipulation that fireworks should not be warehoused at a retail sale outlet.

Indian authorities are notorious for their lax, frequently corruption-greased enforcement of safety regulations, whether they pertain to firecracker stores or industrial worksites.

Fire investigators have yet to determine the cause of the explosion. Two factors that contributed to the high death toll were the lack of available water to fight the fire and the fact that the owner, apparently to thwart thefts, had insisted that there be only a single, narrow

exit-entrance.

With popular anger running high in the wake of the Pallipattu tragedy, the police have arrested the owner of the abandoned rice mill that was turned into the firecracker store-warehouse, the store’s owner, and his manager. Four local revenue officials and three police officers have been suspended, respectively, for “failing to check and identify unlicensed firecracker retailers and wholesalers” and for “failing to stop the illegal storage of firecrackers.”

The state governments of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh have announced a solatium or compensation for suffering of Rs.100,000 (US\$2,200) for the family of each victim.

World Socialist Web Site correspondents visited families of some of the victims in Putter, a village in Andhra Pradesh. Munusamy, 23, an auto rickshaw (three-wheel taxi) driver, and his brother-in-law Ganesh, 15, died in the explosion. They and Ganesh’s father Krishnamurthy, 40, had gone to the Pallipattu store to purchase firecrackers.

Thanasekar, the father of Munusamy, told the WSW: “When Krishnamurthy was waiting outside he heard a massive explosion and immediately fainted. He became conscious only after he was taken to a nearby hospital in Nagari and given treatment. It was after that he phoned to inform us of the blast.

“Immediately we rushed to the spot by auto rickshaw. But the policemen there lied to us saying everyone was safe. We were not allowed to go into the godown (warehouse).

“The fire brigade came to the place but without water to put out the fire. There was absolutely no water available around the firecracker store! It had no license. It took another one hour for the fire brigade to fetch

water from some other place one kilometre away. What is the point of having a fire brigade without water to extinguish a fire?

“Villagers,” said Thanasekar, “rallied in front of the firecracker store that night. They demanded partial demolition of its side wall so that an access to the totally closed place could be opened. But the fire brigade refused. They said they were not authorized for that task.

“In spite of the fact that the firecracker store had many doors, all the shutters were down when it exploded. The management had instructed store workers to pull the shutters down, after a group of people, out of hundreds waiting outside, entered the premise out of turn. They [the managers] wanted to make sure all those who took fire crackers paid for them.”

Thanasekar continued: “All the charred bodies were taken to Thirutani government hospital and from there we collected the dead bodies of my son and Ganesh. I was able to identify my son by the ring on his hand finger.”

Munusamy had two younger brothers and a sister. The eldest of them, Madu, is studying for a post-secondary science degree, while the other two are still in school. Madu also drives a three-wheeler taxi part-time so as to support himself and the family. Now with the loss of Munusamy, who used to earn just Rs. 200 (or about US\$4) a day, Madu, Thanasekar explained, may have to work as an auto rickshaw driver full-time so as to sustain the family.

Madu scoffed at the state government’s offer of Rs.100,000 for each victim’s family: “Is that the way the government values the life of a person? Will they give life to the dead person if we give them the same Rs.100,000? It is not really an accident but murder of people. The state officials didn’t even bother to check the basic safety measures required to run a firecracker store cum godown (warehouse). There was no water and no fire extinguishers.

“But last year there was a fire accident in the same area that killed four people because the Tamil Nadu government didn’t bother to monitor safety measures. Now this time a fire blast has taken more lives.”

Munusamy is survived by a pregnant wife, just 18 years of age, and a one-a-half-year-old child.

The WSWs correspondents also visited the family of

two brothers who perished in the Pallipattu fire, Giri Babu, 27, and Hari Babu, 25. While their father was not available to be interviewed, a young neighbour said, “There was no need to conduct sales at a godown. The state officials were indifferent to the safety measures and allowed the firecracker store to function without license. And why do we need a fire brigade without water?”

The Pallipattu explosion and fire is only the latest in series of firecracker deaths—a pattern that demonstrates the criminal indifference, negligence and frequent outright corruption of the authorities and of India’s political and economic elite as a whole.

In Tamil Nadu alone, there have been at least five such fatal firecracker fire-explosions in the past 10 months.

On February 6, a youth was killed in a fire following an explosion at an unauthorised firecracker manufacturing operation near Mettur. In late September, a fire engulfed a building stocked with firecrackers in Tiruvannamalai district. The fire led to the collapse of a three-storey building, killing eight people and injuring at least 15 others.

On July 20 an explosion in a firecracker unit in Sivakasi in southern Tamil Nadu left 10 dead and 13 seriously injured. This was the second such accident in the district within a fortnight. In an earlier blast at a firecracker unit at Vadakkampatti near Madurai, 17 persons died and over 21 were injured.

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