At least 118 killed in Russian nightclub fire

Andrea Peters
9 December 2009

A fire at a nightclub in Perm, Russia on Saturday night has taken the lives of 118 people so far, with over a hundred more still hospitalized and dozens among them listed in critical condition.

Of the 200 to 250 partygoers estimated to have been at the Lame Horse in the early morning hours of December 5, about 50 percent or more have perished.

The blaze began when a pyrotechnics display set off inside the establishment lit the ceiling and walls, which were decorated with twigs and lined with a flammable material. A stampede ensued as people rushed towards the one narrow doorway exit. Many died in the crush or as a result of smoke inhalation.

Firefighters arrived on the scene quickly, according to eyewitness accounts, and worked to get people out of the burning building. Passersby tried to aid in the rescue effort. In a blog posted shortly after the disaster, one individual described his attempt to help police and ambulance workers identify people in need of immediate attention by shining a light into victims' eyes to determine whether they were still alive.

Funerals have been held for the last several days and will continue this week.

Family members of the dead will each receive 100,000 rubles (about $3,400) in compensation from the government. Those who survived have been promised free plastic and cosmetic surgery to treat wounds.

The Kremlin, which declared this past Monday a national day of mourning, has responded by targeting the nightclub's owner, executive and art directors, and the person who organized the fireworks show. Describing them as individuals with "neither brains nor a conscience," President Dmitri Medvedev promised that they would be "punished harshly."

All four have been arrested and charged with violating fire safety regulations, leading to death. The use of pyrotechnics inside the club was illegal, as were the timber decorations that caught on fire. The charges carry a maximum sentence of up to 7 years in prison.

However, the tragedy is not just the product of these callous individuals. It is one consequence of the rampant corruption and indifference to life in Russia that pervade all aspects of local and federal administration, as well as the business environment.

According to press reports, last year the Lame Horse was cited with violations of fire safety codes, which included blocked evacuation routes and the absence of fire safety doors. However, the club was allowed to continue operating and no follow-up inspection was made to investigate whether the required changes had been made to improve safety. One press report noted that the club was due for another annual check just a few days after the blaze occurred.

While charges have not been filed against the local fire inspector, several commentators have observed that corruption likely played some part in the tragedy this past weekend. In a country that was recently ranked 146 out of 180 countries on Transparency International's world corruption index, it is not outside the realm of possibility that the club's owners paid a bribe to forestall having to upgrade the facility or avoid closure.

A decaying infrastructure and corruption—which in Russia is estimated to be a $300 billion-a-year business—are often the cause of a variety of human tragedies in the country.

According to Russia's emergency services bureau, about 42 people a day lose their lives (15,165 a year) from fires. Antiquated housing, outdated electrical systems, the use of unsafe methods of heating, dangerously constructed buildings, the violation of fire safety regulations and the paying off of inspectors all play a role in these statistics.

Industrial accidents are common, largely as a result of Russia's transportation system, building stock, and

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other basic infrastructure, which have not been updated since the Soviet era and have fallen into a state of disrepair.

In late November, eight soldiers died in a munitions explosion at a military facility in central Russia. They perished during clean-up operations for an incident that occurred at the same location on the 13th of the month, during which two fire fighters died. An AFP article published on November 23 noted, “Accidents involving exploding ammunition are common at Russia’s run-down military bases.”

In mid-August, 74 people died as the result of a disaster at the Sayano-Shushenskaya hydroelectric power station in Siberia. A dam at the facility burst, causing flooding in the machine room and sending an oil slick 80 miles down the Yenisei River. Decrepit turbines, identified as a cause of the breach, had just been inspected and approved for continued operation.

In September, two assailants reportedly beat into unconsciousness a newspaperman from the local Republic who had been critical of the disaster.

The deplorable state of Russia’s infrastructure is widely known. In February of this year Reuters carried an analysis under the headline, “Infrastructure left to rot may cripple Russia,” which pointed out that the current economic crisis has only worsened the situation.

Funds initially allocated for infrastructure development have been set aside to bail out the banking system, a process which itself has been marred by rampant corruption. Under the auspices of the global downturn, Russia’s financial sector and leading oligarchs with ties to the Kremlin have received tens of billions of dollars of government money over the course of the past year.

In an effort to assuage widespread anger over the recent tragedy, the Russian Ministry for Emergencies and the Interior Ministry announced on December 6 that they will begin a series of joint raids of establishments similar to the Perm nightclub to check for fire safety violations.

These measures are little more than posturing. Indifferent to the human cost of these problems, Russia’s corruption problem and infrastructure crisis are matters of concern to those in power only inasmuch as they cut into the ruling elite’s profit-making abilities or fuel mass discontent and popular unrest.

The political establishment in Russia has its roots in the very corruption that it supposedly assails whenever a tragedy of the character of the events in Perm occurs. The social base to which it is wedded will not tolerate any significant incursions into its wealth in an effort to rebuild the country.

The conditions that led to the tragedy in Perm are the product of a political and socio-economic system that views Russia’s resources—the labor of the working class, the country’s natural wealth, and the industrial capital built up over the Soviet period—as little more than objects to be bled white in the process of enriching a layer of extremely wealthy businessmen, state bureaucrats and their allies in the military and security services.

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