

# Fire in Shanghai building kills 79

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An inferno in a Shanghai high-rise building killed at least 79 people and critically injured at least 70 more last Monday. Another 36 people remain missing, mostly senior citizens in their 60s and 70s. The tragedy is another indictment of Chinese capitalism that has produced a feverish real estate boom—completely anarchic construction based on cheap labour and loose building safety regulations designed to produce the quickest possible profits for speculators and investors.

The 28-storey building was constructed in 1997 and housed 150 families, most of them retired teachers. It was undergoing renovation when it went up in flames. The blaze broke out after scaffolding on the north side of the 10th floor caught fire at 2pm and quickly spread to the whole building. Zhu Zhixiang, a firefighting official told state-run CCTV: “The fire became so big because the scaffolding contained a great deal of flammable materials. Heavy wind at the time was another factor.” The scaffolding materials were mainly polyurethane.

Firefighters took four-and-a-half hours to bring the fire under control. A total of 61 fire engines and three helicopters had been called out. Over 100 people were rescued and sent to several hospitals. Li Tianya, a spokesperson from the Jiang’an District Central Hospital, told reporters that 52 people had been admitted, with one in a critical condition and eight who died. Huadong Hospital reported the admission of 25, with three fatalities. Most of the deaths were apparently caused by smoke inhalation.

A 61-year-old survivor at Jiang’an District Central Hospital told the official *Global Times* that she was at home on the 16th floor with her husband, son and granddaughter. “We realised it was a large fire as smoke surrounded us,” she said. “We climbed down to the 15th floor, along the scaffolding, and took the stairs down to the ground floor.”

A 60-year old man living on the 20th floor managed to escape with his wife: “We heard many desperate cries for help coming from the building”, he said. “It was gut-wrenching. Then we saw a woman jump from high above. We didn’t see where she landed, but I don’t think she made it.”

A local man, Li Qubo, told the *China Daily*: “I saw at least four or five people hanging onto the scaffolding which covers the building, screaming for help. Firefighters were trying to get closer and use their hoses to cool a path on the scaffolding so the people could climb down and escape.”

In order to contain rising public anger over the disaster, the Chinese authorities quickly arrested eight people on Tuesday, including four allegedly unlicensed welders.

Cheng Jiulong, the deputy head of Shanghai police, declared at a press conference: “The fire started because someone was illegally welding on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor. The sparks hit the nylon mesh on the outside of the building.” He said the eight suspects would be charged with “responsibility for a major accident,” but declined to name who had been detained.

Officials have been trying to divert attention from the number of deaths to the “difficulty” of controlling fires in high-rise buildings. Chen Fei, the head of firefighting in Shanghai, declared it was “a problem for firefighting internationally”. If that is the case, many of Shanghai’s nearly 20 million residents, who live in some 20,000 high-rise buildings, are at risk.

Public Security Minister Meng Jianzhu, who is also in charge of firefighting, declared that people found responsible for causing fires would be “punished in accordance with the law”. At the same time, he was clearly fearful that public anger could turn to an examination of the social and economic conditions that

produce such tragedies. Meng instructed officials to “quickly smooth people’s emotions and defuse conflicts”.

Ordinary people were critical of the rescue efforts. Du Deyuan, a 66-year-old resident who lived on the 26<sup>th</sup> floor and was out when the fire began, told Reuters: “We feel that the fire rescue measures and methods weren’t fast enough, and secondly they weren’t vigorous enough.”

A woman whose mother died in the fire complained: “It is hard to believe the government now. The drills on TV are successful, but when a fire truly happens, it’s just useless. We feel helpless. There must be something illegal in the construction materials, though we don’t know. I am waiting for the government’s explanation.”

The State Council’s General Office—China’s cabinet—issued a circular on Tuesday ordering government departments to strictly enforce fire control measures in order to prevent major disasters. The circular called for a campaign to inspect and remove fire hazards, and educate the public about fire safety, and for the implementation of a system of accountability for fire accidents.

Like the “safety” campaigns launched after China’s major mining disasters, any action that follows the circular is aimed at placating popular anger, not addressing the fundamental causes of the Shanghai blaze.

A preliminary investigation announced yesterday by the State Council established that the cause of the fire was the use of unlicensed welders, multi-layered sub-contracting and poor management. Luo Lin, head of the State Administration of Work Safety, admitted the fire “should not have happened and could have been completely avoided”.

Unsafe working conditions, lax construction standards and shortcuts in safety measures are rampant in China, together with the replacement of standard materials with shoddy ones. The *New York Times* cited a 2004 academic study that revealed 9 out of 10 Chinese construction workers had no formal training. Many of them were rural migrant labourers.

During the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, as many as 10,000 school children were killed because shoddily constructed school buildings collapsed. Last year, a 13-storey

apartment in Shanghai—not far from the one engulfed in this week’s fire—collapsed and killed one worker. The collapse was caused by illegal underground excavation for a parking lot. Earlier this month, a commercial department building fire in northeastern Jilin province killed 19 and injured 24. Officially, 1,076 people were killed in fires in China last year. Like many other official statistics, such as the number of workers killed in mining accidents, this figure is likely to be an underestimate.

The unsafe practices in China’s vast construction industry, which nearly doubled in size from 2005 to 2009, are the outcome of the drive for profit. The situation has only worsened over the past two years. With a flood of cheap credit from Chinese banks to boost the economy following the onset of the 2008 global financial crisis, and a lack of other avenues for profitable investment, businesses and corrupt officials have turned to real estate speculation. With thousands of buildings being thrown up, China now consumes 40 percent of the world’s cement and steel, mainly in the construction industry.

A senior official of China’s rural housing development ministry admitted last April that China’s buildings were built to last just 25 to 30 years, compared with 74 years in the US. The purpose is simple. Such buildings will have to be continually refurbished, and eventually knocked down and rebuilt. The real estate industry will have a constant market. With the average return on real estate speculation estimated to be 35 percent a year—compared to 5 percent at best for manufacturing—many large industrial companies are moving into real estate, fuelling an ever growing property bubble. The result will be even more disasters like the Shanghai fire.



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