

Fire kills 29 at rehab center in Lima, Peru

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Twenty-six people died of suffocation in a fire that ripped through the “Christ is Love” rehabilitation center located in San Juan de Lurigancho, one of Lima’s poorest districts on January 28. Three more have died since after being hospitalized with severe burns. The building’s lack of windows and the door being closed by an employee contributed to the high number of fatalities.

According to survivors, the accident was the result of a fight between inmates in the midst of which someone apparently set fire to a mattress. It happened early in the morning when the owner and manager on duty had left to go shopping. In the middle of the fight, someone shouted “bump,” which means “escape attempt”. Hearing this, an employee of the enclosure, Garcia Lopez, the eldest son of the owner, locked the building and ran away.

All the dead come from poor families. In the hours following the tragedy, while the corpses lay piled in the street before being transported to the morgue, the scene was dominated by the relatives’ pain and anguish. The enormous frustration over both their loss and the neglect and abusive actions of the owners led to confrontations between family and police.

Most of the victims had been admitted against their will by relatives who watched in despair how drug use was destroying their lives.

Among the survivors was a young man who had been admitted more than three months ago for marijuana use. However, the majority were addicted to alcohol, cocaine or cocaine base. In recent years, drug and alcohol addiction have spread rapidly. Also at “Christ is Love” were young inmates said to be addicted to video games or the Internet.

Initially the owners hid, but then surrendered voluntarily to the police. When charges were filed against a man known as Brother Raul, now confined in the Carquín prison, he told authorities that he was not at the location and blamed co-owner Edgar Garcia Raul Albornoz as well as Julio Matias Torres and Priscilo Mitma Priscillian Ore for not having helped the inmates when the fire started.

Before disappearing, Mitma had told reporters: “I was admitted seven months ago, and in the last two weeks I was asked to bring food from the first to the second floor.”

The four men are charged with the crimes of “exposing people to danger and wrongful death.” These are poor people. They don’t have the resources to hire counsel. The charges carry sentences of four to eight years.

As is usual in rehab centers, employees like Ore Mitma and Matias

Torres are recovering addicts. These individuals, out of good will and, one may add, lack of job opportunities, decide to dedicate their lives to helping other addicts to recover. Such behavior is common in rehabilitation communities worldwide. The message is that only by helping another addict, can one stay “clean.”

The “Christ is Love” compound consisted of two floors and—to prevent inmates from escaping—had no windows. The center’s treatment is so bad and abusive that most try to escape.

On the first floor were the 30 most senior residents. The second floor, which is independent of the first, housed 28 of the more recent patients.

Almost all the dead fell victim to suffocation by smoke, as the lack of windows in the building

of 10 x 4 meters produced a rapid and high accumulation of smoke. When firefighters arrived, they could not open the door and had to punch a hole in the wall to enter the premises.

What the firemen found was that 25 patients and a painter who was doing work in the building had sought refuge in the back of the room and died of smoke inhalation. They also found nine patients suffering from burns who were transported to the hospital.

In a different version of what happened, Anderson Alexander Flores Pistil, 21, one of the survivors of the fire at “Christ is Love,” accused the director Raul Garcia Albornoz of starting the fire by throwing a gas container at protesting inmates, who had torches in their hands.

Flores’ statements were made from his bed at the Dos de Mayo hospital, where he remains hospitalized with 50 percent of his body burned. His testimony is supported by Jesus Manrique, an inmate who was on the second floor and helped rescued 20 of his companions, who said he heard the gas explosion.

Neglect and informality

“Christ is Love” was not licensed and had been closed several times since 2008, but the Ministry of Health allowed it to continue working. It is estimated that there are 400 rehabilitation centers in Peru; over half of them are informal.

“We were locked up as prisoners, they made us read the Bible only, they gave us talks but mistreated us,” said one of the patients.

The cost to families was an initial \$75 plus \$15 weekly. These figures do not cover even the cost of decent food, which is essential for an addict after excessive use of toxic drugs.

“When the quota was not met, the owners forced us to go to markets in the area, especially La Parada, to beg for some food or rotten potatoes for the soup kitchen, the only thing you bought was rice,” said one of the inmates .

Treatment consisted of total isolation in the first month. After three months, patients could receive visits. “We all lived in crowded cabins and three to a small room,” said an inmate. One of those who died had been admitted by force when he was physically carried to the center by four family members while he was drugged.

Former health minister Uriel Garcia said: “I watched in horror as the so-called rehabilitation centers, which should be clinical sites for the recovery of a person addicted to drugs, have become prisons where human rights are violated.”

News reports published after the tragedy indicate that the Peruvian government has no power to monitor the informal rehab centers. All the government agencies—DEDIVA, Ministry of Women, Health Ministry and the municipalities—are pointing fingers at each other in the wake of the tragedy.

The “Christ is Love” fire is the latest in a series of disasters to have occurred in the informal rehabilitation centers.

In 2009, the director of the center “I believe in you” in Chosica (40 kms east of Lima), Rafael Castañeda, committed suicide. It was discovered that he kidnapped, assaulted and forced patients to use drugs.

Three years later the situation of informal centers has not changed.

A 2010 report by the National Commission to Develop Life and Life without Drugs (DEVIDA in Spanish) indicated that of 222 establishments, 57 percent, or 127, were in Lima, mostly in San Juan de Lurigancho. It found that 80 percent were informal.

Operating camouflaged as houses of prayer, the centers didn’t have doctors or psychologists to support clinical treatments. Other centers are disguised as private homes and did not give any information. Over 50 percent of patients are locked in by force by their own relatives, which is against the law.

Most centers are run by former patients who opt for religious talks without doctors or therapists. “Whenever the Health Minister wants to investigate, the centers do not open the door and say it is a Christian center.”

According to experts in drug abuse: “Without a therapeutic contract, which establishes that the patient is willing to be treated, the risk of escaping and the failure of treatment is imminent.”

Even accredited centers do not have the staff or the necessary

facilities. It is estimated that counting all the accredited centers, there are only 700 beds.

These people live in conditions of appalling overcrowding. Patients in rehab centers like “God is Love” and “Learning to be Happy” sleep in dirty bunk beds in narrow rooms that smell of urine.

Reports by the municipalities indicate that most of these centers lack adequate fire extinguishers and medical kits. “We detected that there is no medical history of patients and two had tuberculosis”, said the prosecutor Camargo.

Some of the centers are even cheaper than “Christ is Love”, with family members paying between \$2 and \$3 a week.

The psychiatrist Martin Nizama says that healing is possible only with greater resources. “If the treatment is carried out by a multidisciplinary team of specialists such as sociologists, psychiatrists, social workers, specialists, in addition to medication and adequate infrastructure, then the rehabilitation of the addict is achievable,” he said.

Such treatment is economically impossible for the vast majority of addicts who come from poor families. As a reference, in the US, a 28-day rehab program, covered by health insurance, costs between \$20,000 to \$30,000.

This human tragedy is not separate from economic changes and market liberalization measures imposed by world capitalism, which is praised by the press as being the “engine for growth” of the Peruvian economy. This growth has been accompanied by an increase in the informal sector of the economy, which is the direct result of the destruction of job security by the neoliberal model implemented for 20 years under the last four presidents of Peru.

Informality dominates jobs and trade in the so-called northern, southern and eastern cones of Lima, where the working class, the poor and immigrants from the Andes and the Amazon jungle live. Informality also dominates the small and medium-sized mining companies which together with large transnationals make Peru an important raw material supplier to the global market.

It is estimated that over 70 percent of the economically active population works informally. The government-run health program Essalud is of very low quality and covers a minority of workers.



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