

Fire in Brazil night club kills 245

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Over 245 young people attending the Kiss nightclub in the Southern Brazilian city of Santa Maria, died when the club caught fire early on Sunday morning. About 130 were injured and taken to local hospitals, some of them in a critical state. Around 1,000 students and youth were attending a university party at the hall. The discotheque, which was operating with an expired license, had no functioning fire prevention or firefighting equipment, and had only one open exit. The fire began at 2:30 a.m.

Santa María, a city of 262,000, is a college town located in the state of Rio-Grande-do-Sul, roughly 200 miles from its capital city, Porto Alegre; it hosts the Federal University of Santa María.

Preliminary investigations suggest that the front door to this establishment, built to hold 2,000 people, was being kept shut, allegedly to prevent party-goers from leaving without settling their bills. The fire began shortly after Gurizada Fandangueira, a local band, began playing.

“We had played around five songs when I looked up and noticed the ceiling was burning,” said Rodrigo Martins, a guitarist with the band. Among the dead was accordionist and band member Danilo Jacques, 28.

One of the survivors, Taynne Vendruscolo, spoke to *Radio Programas del Perú*: “The performer was singing with an artifact that produced sparks, the sparks touched the ceiling, which was covered with an insulating foam. That is where a very rapid fire began. At first we thought that an extinguisher would put out the fire so that the party could go on.”

Vendruscolo described panic conditions; hundreds rushed for the front door all at once. She attributes her having survived to the fact that she had been in the VIP area of the discotheque, close to the entrance.

Another survivor, interviewed by the Porto Alegre daily *Zero Hora*: Ezequiel Real, a 23-year-old personal trainer, was one of many youth that helped rescue

others:

“The fire reached the ceiling as the band played *Amor de Chocolate*. When he saw fire, the singer reached for a fire extinguisher that failed to operate. Several of those in attendance attempted to maintain calm. A student noticed that the smoke was very toxic and that ‘it burned to breathe.’ That is where the rescue attempts began. Another student pointed out that there was no functioning fire fighting equipment in the place. A Kiss employee attempted to find refuge inside a freezer... Everything happened very fast, however more could have been saved had there been enough light inside.”

The fire, fueled by the insulating foam on the ceiling, produced thick fumes that were very toxic—most of the dead showed signs of asphyxia. Unable to see or to breathe, people panicked and rushed to the exit, where some were trampled. Fire chief Guido Pedroso de Melo indicated, “A considerable number of the dead were piled up at the door. Most of them died from asphyxia. Unfortunately, people were confined because the main gate was closed. We are still looking for bodies; it is a very sad event.” Fleeing partygoers had another obstacle; tables had been knocked down and were blocking their path.

Eyewitnesses confirmed that security guards, fearing that people were attempting to leave the hall without paying, at first kept the entrance doors closed. There was at least one other exit door in the building and it was locked. Toledo Tiecher, a student, told *Zero Hora* :

“When we began to warn and shout about the fire, the security guard opened his arms to prevent us from leaving. Five or six people threw themselves on him, knocked him down, and knocked the door down. That was the only way out.”

Piles of bodies were also found in the restrooms of the establishment.

On young man, Real, described his efforts at rescuing

others: “I would grab a leg, an arm; I tried to push, but it was difficult. Two girls were screaming for help and I did not know whom to help,” he said. Arriving firefighters stopped rescuers from going back in. “They told us that it was no use sacrificing ourselves because everyone was already dead.”

Such was the intensity of the fire that it took firefighters about three hours to contain the fire that all but destroyed the building—it is now in danger of collapse.

News of the tragedy caused an outpouring of sympathy and grief from citizens across Brazil and elicited a reaction from Brazil’s political establishment.

Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, who had been in Chile attending a summit meeting of the Community of Latin American States and the European Union, rushed back to Porto Alegre and Santa María to meet with victims’ families, as did other Brazilian politicians.

This tragedy appears to have been totally preventable. The Madrid daily *El País* indicated that the discotheque was operating under a license that had expired in August 2012. The dance hall also had no evacuation plan. In response, to questions about those facts from a Brazilian radio station (*Rádio Gaúcha*,) Sergio Roberto Abreu, commander of the local Military Brigade, said that since the establishment had had an operating license in the past it was allowed to operate, while its license was being renewed.

“It needed a final inspection,” declared Abreu, “to check on some equipment, such as fire extinguishers, emergency lighting, and emergency exits.”

At a press conference in Porto Alegre, Rio-Grande-do-Sul governor Tarso Genro made a transparent plea against blaming the owners or the government at this time: “It is a brutal tragedy. Right now we have to show solidarity with family members and participate in the state and national mourning. To assign blame would signify lack of respect.” The governor did promise that an investigation would take place.

The Santa María fire is the deadliest in a decade of nightclub and discotheque fires, beginning with the fire at a Rhode Island disco in 2003, that also involved cheap flammable building materials and fireworks. One hundred people died. A year later, at a Buenos Aires club, a patron ignited a flare that also lit up flammable ceiling material; 194 people died. In 2009, 152 patrons died a nightclub fire in Perm, Russia, ignited by an

indoor fireworks display that set a plastic ceiling on fire. In 2011, bandits attacked and ignited a casino in Monterrey, Mexico, where 50 people died.

Common to each of those fires was cheap flammable building materials, poorly trained personnel, lack of adequate exits and fire equipment, and lax, if not corrupt, inspections, such as those described by commander Abreu.



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