

New Year's Eve stampede in Shanghai kills 36

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A human stampede during New Year's Eve celebrations in central Shanghai left 36 people dead and another 47 injured, including 13 in a critical condition.

Twenty-five people remained in hospital as of Sunday afternoon. The victims included one Malaysian and one Taiwanese. According to the Xinhua state news agency, the majority of those killed were reportedly in their 20s, including students from Fudan University, East China Normal University and East China University of Political Science. The average age of those killed was just 22, with the youngest a 12-year-old boy. Two thirds of the victims were female.

The stampede occurred just before midnight last Wednesday night in the Bund, a broad riverside avenue in Shanghai overlooking the Huangpu River. The area, which includes century-old colonial-era buildings, is a major international tourist destination.

While it is not clear what immediately triggered the stampede, media reports and comments from the relatives of those killed indicate that the government's refusal to prepare basic public safety precautions created the conditions for the disaster.

Shanghai is China's largest city, with over 24 million inhabitants. For the last three years, as part of official attempts to promote the city as an international financial hub and cosmopolitan business centre, the government has staged New Year's Eve celebrations in the area, including a 3D light display show over the river. Following a rapid increase in crowd numbers, with an attendance of 300,000 people last year, the government hastily cancelled the spectacle several days before New Year's Eve, replacing it with a smaller, ticketed event to be held at a nearby 2,000-capacity venue, which would not be open to the public.

A January 3 Associated Press article cited financial magazine *Caixin* as reporting that local Shanghai media

continued to hype the light show. It appears that many people were unaware of the cancellation, as just before midnight the crowd numbers reportedly approached those of the previous year.

Unlike in previous years, however, basic safety measures were not enforced, including closing off access to an elevated viewing platform and to the nearest subway station.

The stampede reportedly took place at the bottom of the seventeen-step, five metre-wide concrete stairway to the viewing platform. At 11:20 p.m., authorities announced that the display had been cancelled, and at approximately 11:35 p.m., the stampede reportedly began as some people attempted to move up and others down the stairs, causing people to fall row by row on the stairwell.

Zhao Weiwei, a survivor whose girlfriend, Pan Haiqin, was killed in the stampede, told the Associated Press: "It was unstoppable. The force from above fell on us. There might have been two to three security people. That was virtually none."

A father whose daughter was killed in the stampede blamed the authorities: "You cancelled the light show, but did you properly notify the public? Once people started to show up in the hundreds of thousands, did you have backup measures to ensure safety? What were you doing during the time the crowds were growing? The government has been seriously derelict of its duties."

A Shanghai resident, Zhao Chu, told Associated Press: "It's been a tradition to see the lights on the Bund on New Year's Eve. Shanghai people know it, and the whole country knows it. The government should have foreseen the crowds on that night. Such incidents could have been avoided."

Wang Qiang, a patrol officer, told state media:

“Because there was no scheduled event, there was no traffic control.” He added that tourists kept asking him if there would be a light show. Police numbers were also downgraded, from 6,000 the previous year, to 700.

Family members of victims of the tragedy were also outraged by the inadequate and overworked healthcare infrastructure. According to Associated Press, the family of a 25-year-old woman killed in the stampede said she had a stable pulse and opened her eyes twice, appearing conscious, before she was taken to hospital, but there was no doctor available to treat her when she arrived.

“As one of the first to arrive at a hospital, she should have had the best chances of survival, but the delay cost her life,” the family said in a statement. The uncle said: “We are extremely angry. Her life should not have been ended like this.”

The *South China Morning Post* reported today that dozens of relatives of victims protested yesterday outside the gates of the municipal government building, demanding compensation and the release of the bodies of the deceased. A young man from Chengdu, in Sichuan province, told the newspaper he had lost his cousin in the accident and that authorities were closely watching the relatives. “We have been arranged to stay at different places. There are three people following us wherever we go,” he said. He added that authorities had not initiated any discussion about the incident.

The Shanghai government has responded to the disaster by suppressing public criticism of its role in the tragedy. According to the *Financial Times*, interviews with victims have been banned, and only photos cleared by censors can be published. Online discussions have been shut down and critical comments deleted.

The *South China Morning Post* reported that police have interrogated dozens of those who posted online criticisms.

At the same time, the Chinese state-run media has criticised local government officials, and President Xi Jinping has announced that the government will launch an immediate inquiry into the incident. This suggests that, as with previous disasters, a small number of local officials will be punished in order to prevent any examination of the underlying social issues revealed and whitewash the responsibility of the Stalinist regime in Beijing.

In February 2004, a human stampede on an

overcrowded canal bridge in Beijing’s Miyun district, during the city’s lantern festival, left 37 people dead and 15 injured. As a result, the district mayor and 14 other officials were punished, including two who were sentenced to three years in prison, but no broader action was taken.

Shanghai is a deeply socially polarised city. It has the fastest growing population in the world, increasing by an average of 10 percent a year over the last 20 years. It is China’s largest industrial and financial centre, handling more than a quarter of trade passing through the country’s ports. The city has been developed as a financial hub to rival Hong Kong and attract the international financial elite. It boasts more than 5,000 skyscrapers for residential and commercial complexes and luxury hotels.

Alongside this extraordinary opulence is enormous poverty. Migrant workers who have moved to escape grinding poverty in rural China make up 40 percent of the city’s inhabitants, and are known as the “floating population,” compelled to accept the most low-paid, exploitative work.

The staging of massive extravaganzas to promote the city as a key financial hub, as well as the disregard for the safety of hundreds of thousands of people, is another demonstration of the contempt of government authorities for the majority of the population which is struggling to survive.



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