

Scaffolding collapse in Vietnam kills 13 workers

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At least 13 workers were killed and 15 critically injured when a 25-metre high, 40-metre long and 35-metre wide scaffolding system collapsed last Wednesday at the Vung Ang Economic Zone in the central Vietnamese coastal province of Ha Tinh.

The workers were constructing a seawall as part of a \$10 billion steel complex being built by a subsidiary of the Taiwanese transnational, Formosa Plastics Group (FPG). The workers were from a Vietnamese sub-contractor hired by Samsung C&T Corp.

The accident happened at 8 p.m. during the night shift. The rail of a hydraulic system used to lift building materials suddenly fell from a height of 30 metres, hitting the scaffolding and bringing down hundreds of tons of metal scaffolding on the construction workers.

Several survivors said workers raised concerns about the scaffolding and tried to leave the site before the collapse. They were ordered back to work by a manager, who assured them that the scaffolding was safe.

Phan Anh Dung, an injured worker, told *Thanh Nien News* that workers heard cracking noises and the scaffolding shook several times, causing workers to flee. He and other workers climbed down in panic but, “we had to come back and 30 minutes later the scaffolding tumbled down.”

Another survivor, Dinh Ninh Dan, told the Associated Press that after the scaffolding shook twice, several workers rushed to an elevator at the site but were told it was safe. “After 10 more minutes, the scaffolding, which was about 20 metres high, suddenly collapsed,” he said. “I quickly grabbed an iron bar but fell free. People were screaming, calling for help from the rubble. I was lucky to survive.”

Around 1,000 rescue personnel desperately worked through the night to free those trapped in the rubble.

The injured were taken to a hospital in Ky Anh District, where the economic zone is based.

Last week’s disaster was not the first serious industrial accident at FPG’s steel complex. Last July, two workers were killed and three others severely injured when scaffolding collapsed during the construction of a water plant.

In line with the governing Vietnamese Communist Party’s so-called *doi moi* (renewal) market reform program to attract foreign investment, the Stalinist regime has based its entire economic strategy on transforming the country into a cheap labour platform for transnational corporations.

According to a Japan External Trade Organisation report in 2013, a factory worker in Hanoi earns one third less than a Beijing worker. In 2014 Microsoft announced it was moving its Nokia phone production from China to Vietnam.

Desperate to ensure that last week’s accident does not become a focal point for an eruption of industrial action over unsafe working conditions and other exploitative labour practices, Deputy Prime Minister Hoang Trung Hai was sent to oversee emergency rescue operations at Vung Ang Economic Zone.

Viet Nam News also reported the government planned to give families of each victim \$7,000 in compensation. The government announced inquiries into both the causes of the accident and the safety standards at the FPG site.

Any government review into the accident, however, will do nothing to reverse Vietnam’s appalling industrial safety record. According to official statistics, 630 people were killed and over 6,700 industrial accidents occurred in 2014. These figures, which are an increase on the previous year, are a gross underestimation of the actual number of accidents.

According to the Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, only 5 percent of enterprises submitted reports to the government on occupational accidents. In addition, only two cases resulting in serious injury or death in 2014 led to criminal prosecutions against employers.

International investors confidently boosted FPG's stock price the day after the accident. MasterLink Securities analyst Tom Tang told the *China Post*: "I guess that FPG has bought insurance for the scaffold construction. I do not think the accident will have an adverse financial impact on the group."

The government has long backed the FPG project and pushed for early completion. On February 11, an article in the *Sai Gon Giai Phong* newspaper, an organ of the Vietnamese Communist Party, declared that work on the FPG site was quickly moving ahead because the company had "mobilised all human and material resources working around the clock."

In July 2013, the *Nhan Dan Newspaper*, another official publication, reported that Deputy Prime Minister Hoang Trung Hai visited Ha Tinh province and "urged the central province agencies of Ha Tinh to complete key projects ahead of schedule."

The deputy prime minister "praised the efforts by Taiwan (China) Formosa Corporation." He "urged the contractor to ensure the project work progresses on schedule" and said the project was an "important factor to promote socio-economic development not only for Ha Tinh and the central region but also the whole country."

The Vung Ang Economic Zone has the deepest port in the North Central region and is located on the main maritime routes to South Asia, North America and Europe. It also provides overland access to Laos. The zone is only 60 kilometres from the Thach Khe iron mine, one of the largest in Southeast Asia.

Vietnam's drive to attract foreign investment at the expense of its regional rivals by maintaining low wages, driving up productivity and cutting production costs guarantees that further large-scale industrial disasters are inevitable.



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