

At least 45 workers die in Manila factory fire

Joseph Santolan
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At least 45 workers are confirmed dead and another 25 or more remain missing after a fire broke out at noon on Wednesday inside the Kentex factory on the northern outskirts of Metro Manila in the Philippines.

Kentex manufactures rubber slippers at the plant in the city of Valenzuela. According to an interview with its owner, Veato Ang, it employed 200 to 300 workers.

The two-storey factory occupied 3,000 square meters but had only two working exits. The building had no alarms, no sprinkler system, and, it seems, no fire extinguishers. It was a mass of unpainted concrete, and poorly ventilated despite the chemicals being used throughout the building.

The fire department managed to have the fire under control by 5 p.m., and announced that the fire was out at 7 p.m. The blaze burned for seven hours.

The building's windows were barred and no workers could escape through them. Bystanders reported to the media that they saw the arms of workers waving frantically through the window bars on the second floor.

The fire was reportedly started by welding work on the front entrance, near open containers of chemical solvent used in the processing of rubber and plastic. The canisters exploded and the building caught fire.

Some workers who were on lunch break were able to run to the street. All the workers on the second floor were trapped. The building rapidly filled with a toxic, black smoke as the rubber and various chemicals ignited.

There were apparently no viable exits on the second floor. Family members reported that their loved ones sent them text messages on their phones from the second floor during the fire, unable to escape the smoke and flames.

The footage that news crews broadcast from the inside the factory revealed the bodies of several workers, charred beyond any recognition. One body

was shown sprawled, head first, on the stairs.

The fire crew could not determine how many workers were dead as the remains of the corpses were fragmentary and it was hard to tell how many pieces belonged to each person. They resorted to counting skulls, announcing at one point that they had counted 28. The death toll will likely rise to nearly 70 victims.

Kennedy Tan, a local government council member, told the press that he recalled that the factory had “suffered a smaller fire last year but he could not remember if there had been any casualties.”

The company's management could not account for how many employees were at work, claiming that all the time cards and company records were burned in the fire.

Workers' family members gathered in the street outside. The city set up a tent where they came to seek news of their loved ones. Lacking any information about who was inside, or even a list of those employed in the firm, the city and the factory owners compiled a list of workers from relatives.

Some people on the street informed the press that they had as many as five family members in the factory. A woman was looking for her husband, two sisters and two nephews.

Valenzuela city mayor Rexlon Gatchalian promised unspecified compensation for the families of the victims and a speedy investigation. The owner promised he would pay for counseling services.

Valenzuela was once in Bulacan province, and part of the vast plains of rice farming on the southern edge of the Central Luzon valley. Over the past several decades, the dirty urban sprawl of greater Manila has engulfed Valenzuela and a good deal of Bulacan.

Valenzuela, a densely-crowded city, combines much of the worst of urban and rural life. Squat concrete factories and tracts of cheap hollow-block housing are occasionally interspersed with fallow fields where only

talahib grass will grow.

Kentex manufactured *tsinelas*, the rubber flip-flop footwear routinely worn by most people in the Philippines. In particular, Kentex manufactured *tsinelas* branded Havaianas, a cheap local imitation of Havaianas, which are at the upper end of the market.

Havaianas, manufactured in Brazil, sell 150 million pairs worldwide a year. Dedicated boutique shops in Philippine malls, sell them from 650 to 1,000 pesos (\$US14–20). A minimum wage worker in Valenzuela would be paid just 466 pesos a day for non-agricultural labor. It is very likely that the Kentex workers were paid less than the minimum wage.

In countries of belated capitalist development like the Philippines, workers routinely cannot afford the everyday consumer goods that they themselves produce. Global capitalism has created vast industries dedicated to the manufacturing of cheap alternative items, two-bit plastic knock-offs, and pirated brand names and logos. These are then sold to the factory workers who have labored making the originals. In the Philippines, Kentex *tsinelas* could be purchased for 40 or 50 pesos.

Responsibility for the death of each Kentex worker extends far beyond Kentex's owners and the city and national governments. It is a crime of global capitalism. The events in Valenzuela are repeated, on a greater or lesser scale, every year in the Philippines and around the world.

Capitalism has made this crime—masses of workers, trapped in their workplaces, burned to death—ubiquitous, from the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in New York to the Thai Kader toy manufacturing fire in 1993. Nearly 300 workers died in a single factory fire in Pakistan, and 112 in single incident in Bangladesh, both in 2012 alone.

Global retail manufacturers aggressively push cost-cutting measures in order to scrape out every last cent of profit, without any regard for workers' safety. In order to produce the cheap alternatives to these branded retail giants, companies like Kentex strive to be even more brutal.



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