

China: More than 50 dead in Tianjin factory explosion

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14 August 2015

According to the latest official figures, more than 50 people died as a result of a massive explosion at a factory complex in the Chinese port city of Tianjin on Wednesday night. Some 701 people were hospitalised after the blast, with 70 of them in a critical condition. The death toll from the disaster is expected to rise considerably over the coming days, with scores of people still missing and unaccounted for.

Fires have yet to be extinguished at the epicentre of the explosion. At least 17 of the dead were firefighters and dozens more are missing. Authorities have still not announced the precise cause of the two blasts that shook Tianjin at around 11:30 p.m. on Wednesday but the eruptions are known to have originated at the warehouses of Rui Hai International Logistics, a company that ships “hazardous” materials. Authorities have claimed that the chemicals involved in the blast are not yet known.

Some experts suggested that the blasts may have been precipitated by attempts to fight a fire that broke out on the industrial complex, citing the presence of calcium carbide at the site, a chemical that emits flammable gases when wet.

The explosions, the first equivalent to 3 tonnes of TNT, and the second, to 23 tonnes, have created a humanitarian catastrophe in the city of 15 million. Survivors described the blasts as the equivalent of an earthquake, followed by a fireball that lit up the sky. Shards of glass lashed wide swathes of the city, and were responsible for many of the fatalities and injuries.

Residential buildings around the factory complex were severely affected, including a dormitory housing as many as 2,000 migrant workers, which collapsed. About 3,500 people have been evacuated, and placed in temporary accommodation. According to some reports, that number may rise to 6,000.

The reaction of the Chinese regime has revealed its fear that the disaster could become a focal point for mounting opposition to social inequality and the horrendous conditions confronting millions of workers throughout the country.

Immediately after the blast, Chinese President Xi Jinping issued a statement, urging a “full effort” in the rescue and recovery operations. On Thursday, the Chinese government’s cabinet, the State Council, sent a group headed by Public Security Minister Guo Shengkun to oversee the official response in the city.

At least 217 military nuclear and chemical specialists have been dispatched to the city with detecting devices, according to state media. While officials sought to downplay the public health risks associated with the blast, state publications reported on Friday that teams began to clear hundreds of tonnes of dangerous chemicals from the site of the explosion, including potassium nitrate, hydrogen peroxide, and sodium cyanide.

Greenpeace and other environmental organisations warned that if some of the chemicals believed to have been stored at the factory complexes entered water or air systems, they would create a major health crisis.

Following a well-worn political path, the authorities appear to be attempting to scapegoat factory officials, some of whom reportedly were taken into custody, in order to cover up their own responsibility for the disaster.

Industrial explosions and other accidents, a regular occurrence, are an inevitable product of the feverish growth of Chinese capitalism, presided over by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime. Every aspect of workers’ safety, conditions and lives is subordinated to the pursuit of ever-greater profits for the major corporations that dominate economic life.

Information has come to light indicating that authorities have long-known of the unsafe practices of the major chemical companies in Tianjin. According to media reports, a notice posted by Tianjin Administration of Work Safety last week stated that city officials had conducted a briefing with the executives of 20 companies involved in the storage and transport of dangerous chemicals. Officials reportedly urged the executives to ensure that safety measures were taken, under conditions of “extreme heat, high humidity and heavy rain.”

Reuters also reported that maritime authorities found that the company which owned the factories at the centre of the explosion violated packaging regulations during a safety inspection two years ago.

The location of the factory, near residential and public buildings, “clearly violated” official safety rules, according to the *People’s Daily*, one of the main publications of the Chinese regime. According to its article, factories stocking dangerous goods must be over one kilometre from public buildings. There were two residential compounds, major public roads, a hospital and other public utilities within the immediate radius of the factory complex.

The disaster, and the official response to it, has triggered mounting anger among the city’s residents.

The *Australian* reported the comments of one woman, Mrs Zhang, whose husband lived and worked in the factory complex. “I heard the news about 5 a.m. and rushed here from Tianjin city, but so far no one will help me,” she said. “Someone brought me to the hospital but the hospital’s lists are so unclear, I cannot find his name. The hospital people have asked me to be patient, but I can’t be patient, I need to find my husband.”

Chinese police and security personnel reportedly turned away residents who attempted to photograph the blast site. Journalists were barred from one of the main hospitals treating victims of the explosion.

According to the *New York Times*, Tianjin’s Internet Police issued a warning that anyone spreading rumours about the blast will be “severely dealt with according to the law.” Critical social media posts reportedly were deleted. One social media user, who claimed to work for Tianjin TV, denounced the official response to the disaster, and stated that while his network had 100 reporters in the city, only central government-approved

accounts of the catastrophe could be broadcast.

Underlying the nervous response of Chinese officials to the Tianjin explosion is the deepening crisis of the entire CCP regime. The blast occurred the day after authorities began to devalue the yuan, a measure without precedent in recent years, in response to figures showing yet another slump in exports, and a major decline in factory activity.

A protracted slowdown of the Chinese economy is calling into question, in the minds of working people, the political legitimacy of the regime. For years, it has subordinated every aspect of social life to the pursuit of economic growth. Amid conditions of slump, the gulf between the tiny layer of billionaires upon which the CCP rests, and the many millions of workers confronting an escalating social crisis is becoming ever more glaring, and presages major social upheavals.



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