

Earthquake in Taiwan leaves over 100 killed and missing

Ben McGrath
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A 6.4-magnitude earthquake struck southern Taiwan just before 4 a.m. Saturday while people slept, causing dozens of deaths in the city of Tainan. The epicenter was located at Kaohsiung. With the missing still being pulled from the wreckage, the number of dead is expected to rise in the coming days. The tragedy drives home once again the lack of regard for basic safety standards under capitalism.

The latest figures from the Tainan city government indicate 41 people have been confirmed dead, all but two of them from the 17-storey Weiguan Golden Dragon (or Weiguan Jinlong) Tower apartment complex, which collapsed. On Monday, four people were pulled from the wreckage including an 8-year-old girl, but more than 100 people remain missing.

“I was trapped in a room in a building toppled by the quake,” said a woman surnamed Chien, who was rescued along with her 3-year-old daughter and husband. “The smell of gas was thick in the air, and I was worried that I would be killed by an explosion if not crushed to death in the collapsed building.”

Sixteen rescue teams have worked to reach the survivors, but experienced difficulty doing so. Many of the missing are likely to be students from the local Kun Shan University, who rented temporary rooms in the apartment complex, which comprised nine buildings, before its collapse. Officials initially hoped that the death rate would be low as the permanent residents had been accounted for.

The rooms rented by the students were located in the middle section of the complex and were largely buried. Officials and even permanent residents of the building were unaware who was in the temporary accommodations. Infrared scans on Sunday morning indicated that 130 people could be inside the ruins.

Backhoes were employed to begin shifting the larger

pieces of debris in an effort to reach those still trapped. Rescuers were initially reluctant to use this equipment, fearing that survivors could be crushed in the process. “It’s so squashed together that there’s no way to get in there,” said Shing Jon Chu, from the Taiwan Elite International Rescue Association.

The chances of finding survivors are decreasing. Besides being trapped under rubble, burst water pipes and temperatures in the low 50s at night have raised the risk of hypothermia.

The earthquake struck during the Lunar New Year, one of Taiwan’s largest holidays when families gather. Both outgoing President Ma Ying-jeou and President-elect Tsai Ing-wen sought to project a sense of leadership. Ma supposedly oversaw rescue operations while Tsai promised safety checks on old buildings. Such posturing is used to deflect attention from the underlying causes of the tragedy, which lie in the complete official disregard for safety standards.

While earthquakes cannot be predicted or prevented, their impact can be lessened by enforcing building standards designed to minimize damage. This does not seem to be the case with the Weiguan Golden Dragon apartment complex.

Taiwan is located on the “Ring of Fire” around the Pacific Ocean basin that stretches from New Zealand to East Asia and around to the west coasts of North and South America. The intersection of tectonic plates in these regions results in frequent earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. The last major earthquake in Taiwan occurred in September 1999, when 2,415 people were killed.

Following the collapse of the Weiguan Golden Dragon complex, it was revealed that pillars had been constructed using old cooking oil cans, immediately calling into question the structural integrity of the

building.

Tai Yun-fa, an engineer, told Taiwan's Central News Agency that the cans were likely used for aesthetic purposes to make pillars look larger, calling the idea that they would be used for support "preposterous."

At the same time, Tai stated: "The use of cooking oil cans for such purposes in construction was not illegal prior to September 1999, but since then styrofoam and formwork boards have been used instead." Such comments have not lessened concerns over the integrity of the structure, however.

Construction on the apartment complex began in 1982 but was only completed 10 years later, amid myriad problems. The Weiguan Construction Company ran out of money for the building, before raising the capital to complete the project. Undoubtedly, it cut corners at the expense of safety in its bid to finish the complex.

The building's developer, Lin Minghui, had a questionable past. According to the *New York Times*, Lin changed his name four times before starting new business deals. He has now been arrested, along with two architects of the Weiguan Construction Company, on suspicion of professional negligence leading to deaths and injuries.

Yang Yumin, an engineer who lives across the street from the now destroyed complex, commented: "Locals never bought condos there because the builders did not have a good reputation—it was all outsiders who bought there."

Lee Kunhuan, an architect who sits on the Tainan City Council, said the construction company exploited a number of loopholes in the building codes in order to construct the apartment complex. "When the design and blueprints were done, they probably did not allow for earthquakes," Lee said.

Lee commented that buildings in the area are now limited to four storeys, indicating officials were well aware of the danger represented by the 17-storey complex, and that its U-shaped design was less sturdy than buildings using a square-shaped design.

The terrible collapse of the Weiguan Golden Dragon raises many questions about the adequacy of the building standards and their enforcement by government at all levels. However, the underlying causes of such tragedies lie in the predatory character of the capitalist system that puts profits ahead of the

health and safety of working people.



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