

Government-company negligence responsible for Indian flyover disaster

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At least 24 people were killed and up to 90 injured when a 150-metre section of a 2.2-kilometre flyover under construction in Kolkata [Calcutta], West Bengal's state capital, collapsed at midday on March 31. The project crossed over Vivekananda Road in the heavily-congested Burrabazar area, the location of the city's largest wholesale market.

The flyover was being built by IVRCL Infrastructure, which has projects throughout India as well as in Sri Lanka, the Middle East and Africa. Following the failure of a restructuring plan for IVRCL early this year, the company was taken over by Indian banks, which now own 51 percent.

Volunteers and local people desperately attempted to rescue victims trapped under tonnes of concrete rubble and twisted steel immediately after the collapse. Their initial efforts, however, were handicapped by the absence of gas cutters and cranes. Some eye-witnesses told the media that they first thought the disaster had been caused by an earthquake. Others said the collapsing structure sounded like a massive bomb blast.

Engineering experts from Kharagpur-IIT and Jadavpur University told the Indo-Asian News Service that the disaster was a product of inadequate planning, lengthy construction delays, cost-cutting, bad design and questionable tendering processes.

In a desperate attempt to wash his company's hands of any responsibility, IVRCL Infrastructure's human resources chief, Panduranga Rao, cynically told the media that the incident was "an act of god"—provoking a storm of public criticism.

The catastrophe is clearly the responsibility of successive West Bengal state governments—Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), CPM-led Left Front and Trinamul Congress alike. These administrations have turned a blind-eye to sub-standard

and dangerous methods throughout the construction industry.

IVRCL Infrastructure's cost-cutting and its use of below-standard materials were well known throughout India. The heavily-indebted company was blacklisted by the Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand state governments, as well as the rail ministry's Rail Vikas Nigam Ltd (RVNL).

Satish Agnihotri, RVNL's managing director, told the *New York Times* that IVRCL was a "major defaulter." He said RVNL decided to terminate all of its contracts with the company three years ago over poor performance.

IVRCL's elevated road over Vivekananda Road was initially commissioned by the Left Front state government in February 2009. The company was given 18 months to complete the project but missed eight deadlines over the next six years. Despite this, the current Trinamul Congress government maintained its contract with the company.

The West Bengal government has feigned concern about the tragedy and begun moving against the company in an attempt to contain popular anger.

Kolkata police yesterday raided and sealed three IVRCL offices and filed cases against the company under sections 304, 308 and 407 of the Indian Penal Code. These charges include a criminal complaint of culpable homicide and criminal breach of trust. According to press reports, eight employees were detained.

The state government also announced a 500,000-rupee (\$US7,550) compensation package for each of the families with relatives killed, 200,000 rupees (\$3,020) for the critically injured and 100,000 rupees (\$1,510) for those suffering minor injuries.

The flyover collapse occurred on the eve of state

assembly elections, to be held in six phases from April 4 to May 5. All the major contending parties, which are implicated in one way or another, have seized on the tragedy in an attempt to blame their rivals and deflect attention from their own political culpability.

Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury, leader of the opposition Congress Party, which is in an alliance with the CPM-led Left Front in the state elections, demanded the arrest of the Kolkata city mayor and Urban Development Minister Firhad Hakim.

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee countered: “It is not the time to play politics. Rather we should work for the rescue and relief of the injured.” She declared, however, that the flyover construction began under the former Left Front government and that it was responsible for the collapse. “A blacklisted company,” she said, “shouldn’t have got the project.”

The former Left Front urban development minister, Asok Bhattacharya, blamed his successor Hakim for the disaster. Both are equally responsible for ignoring IVRCL’s cost-cutting methods—Bhattacharya when the contract was originally agreed, and Hakim in the current administration.

The Kolkata-based *Telegraph* reported that engineers working on the flyover were stunned when Chief Minister Banerjee publicly announced last November that the project would be ready in February 2016. At that point, only 76 percent of the work was complete.

“With only about six hours of work allowed each day, between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m., the engineers had told this paper that there wasn’t enough time to complete the project by February. As expected, the February deadline passed and a new one was set for August,” the *Telegraph* said.

An engineer with another infrastructure company told the newspaper: “There are telltale signs when a scaffolding can’t bear the weight of concrete, and basic monitoring can detect these. If the scaffolding can’t hold on, then it will bend and nuts and bolts will come loose. One should immediately stop work and reinforce the scaffolding. But when in a hurry, such points can get ignored.”

Banerjee clearly wanted the flyover construction completed by February in order to present it as a government “success story” for the state election campaign.

This week’s disaster is the just the latest in an

escalating number of construction disasters in India. Over 300 men, women and children were killed and thousands injured in 12 separate building collapses between 2007 and 2014.

Together with those killed in Kolkata, they are innocent victims of the criminal neglect of basic safety procedures in the construction industry as well as political negligence and cover-up by India’s ruling elite.



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