

# Dormitory fire kills 17 children in Thailand

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At least 17 young girls died in a horrific fire that broke out at 10:30 on Sunday night at a school dormitory in the Wiang Pa Pao district of Chiang Rai, Thailand. According to local police, two girls were unaccounted for and five were injured.

The school, Pithakkiart Witthaya, is run by the Siam Ruam Jai Foundation, a charity that provides classes for children aged between 5 and 12 years from the northern region's impoverished hill tribes who live near the border with Myanmar and Laos.

Approximately 14 girls managed to escape unharmed. The province's deputy governor, Arkom Sukapan, told Agence France Presse: "Some were not yet asleep so they escaped. But others were asleep and could not escape, resulting in the large number of casualties."

According to the *Nation*, "Police Major-General Sant Sukhavach ... said yesterday evidence suggested the fire broke out because of a melting fluorescent tube," which had ignited a pile of clothes. The cause of the fire has not been confirmed, however.

Like many buildings throughout Thailand, it appears that the dormitory had no fire alarm, sprinkler system or fire escape. Reports indicate that the fire spread rapidly and students had very little warning; a teacher ran through the hall shouting "fire." Within minutes, the blaze had become extremely dangerous.

Many children were trapped on the second floor. At least one survivor, Makhata Taweejirakul, was forced to jump for her life. Twelve-year-old Kwanjira Anantapetch told the *Nation*: "Our teacher started tying bed sheets together and using it as a rope for children to scale down from the second floor." Others used a nylon rope.

Two fire trucks, along with 10 members of the Siam Ruam Jai Foundation, took two hours to bring the fire under control. One described it as "the worst fire I've ever seen."

Thai media reports indicate that families of the dead

children can receive 200,000 baht under the school's insurance provisions. This is just over \$US5,600.

The tragedy is the product of a lack of basic safety precautions, combined with the extreme poverty and hardship suffered by large sections of the population who are forced to rely on charity to educate their children.

The Chiang Rai hill tribes are among the most exploited populations in Thailand. According to AFP, "Many are descendants of refugees from Myanmar or China and exist within subsistence farming communities often beyond the reach of state resources.

"Hill tribe children suffer at school, as well as in their health and development. Poverty means adults are easy prey for drug gangs who pay them to smuggle narcotics—including heroin and amphetamines—across the zone, known as the 'Golden Triangle.'" The tribes also face discrimination from the state and repression by Thai security forces.

The country's military regime, installed in a coup in May 2014 with the tacit support of the United States, has sought to whip up nationalism and xenophobia to divert from the country's social crisis. It is waging a brutal campaign to repatriate more than 100,000 Myanmar refugees who live in nine camps near the border.

On Monday morning a Myanmar migrant was shot dead by Thai police following an escape by 21 men from an immigration detention centre in Phang Nga province. The victim was a member of the persecuted Rohingya Muslim minority.

The dormitory fire is only the latest in a litany of disasters linked to Thailand's extremely poor building standards and the intense exploitation of workers. According to the latest government statistics there were 100,392 workplace accidents or injuries in 2014, including 625 deaths and 1,485 cases of "loss of organ." These figures, which are based on reported

incidents, no doubt underestimate the scale of the problem.

In 1993 the world's largest ever factory fire, at the Kader Toy Factory outside Bangkok, killed 188 workers and injured over 500. There were no fire extinguishers, no alarms and no sprinkler systems. The building was essentially a death trap.

The collapse of the Royal Plaza Hotel in Nakhon Ratchasima three months later, due to the improper addition of three new floors, resulted in 137 deaths and 227 injuries. In July 1997, the Royal Jomtien Resort Hotel fire in Pattaya, blamed on poor fire-preparedness, killed 91 people and injured 53.

On 1 January 2009, 66 people died in a fire at the Santika night club in Bangkok. Again, there was a lack of adequate prevention and safety measures, including sufficient emergency exits.

According to the *Bangkok Post*, former general and self-appointed Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-Ocha made a brief statement on Monday "expressing deep regret" on hearing of the deaths in the Pithakkiart Witthaya dormitory fire.

As with the previous disasters, however, any official investigation into the Chiang Rai school dormitory fire will be strictly limited to identifying the immediate cause and possibly finding an individual scapegoat. There will be no effort made to address the broader lack of regulation and enforcement of building standards, or to alleviate poverty and the lack of basic services for people in the hill tribes.

*The author also recommends:*

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