Fire in Guatemalan “safe home” for youth kills dozens of locked-in girls

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A fire killing dozens at an overcrowded residential facility for youth on the outskirts of Guatemala City has provoked broad outrage. Health authorities have reported 35 girls dead and 23 hospitalized as a result of the blaze in the female section of the facility. Nine of the survivors are reportedly connected to respirators and “can die at any moment.”

A survivor at one of the hospitals reported that some of the at-risk youth being supposedly sheltered from domestic violence, homelessness, and abandonment were seeking to escape due to widespread abuse and poor conditions within the facility itself.

On Tuesday, about 60 of them managed to flee but were detained by the National Police, returned to the Virgen de la Asunción shelter and locked inside of a 4-meter by 4-meter room. Some of the 52 girls inside reportedly set mattresses on fire, which quickly consumed the room with flames and smoke.

This calamity was not only the result of the immediate abuse and conditions at the shelter, but more fundamentally of the desperate situations that youth face after decades of imperialist exploitation and right-wing measures that have ruined social conditions and fueled violence in Guatemala.

Thousands of youth and young workers have taken the dangerous journey to the United States to escape these same conditions that await them once again if they are deported under the mass roundup and deportation of immigrants begun by the Trump administration.

The Guatemalan fire department and police authorities who responded to the incident referred to the youth as “rebelling inmates” and blamed each other for a 40-minute delay in attending to the fire. The attorney general blamed the entire incident on “the staff, the director and the secretary” of Social Welfare, while the Guatemalan president, Jimmy Morales, cynically claimed that “all Guatemalans bear part of the responsibility, which is that of the nation, the republic we have built.”

At a press conference on Thursday, Morales announced that the shelter will be closed and the youth sent to other facilities. Then, he scorned those protesting, including the families of the victims, while confessing that not much will be done to prevent future disasters. “We can do a lot, from protesting to even proposing and acting; this last word is the hardest,” he concluded, not staying for questions.

That evening, hundreds gathered outside of the National Palace to protest the fire. Millions in Guatemala are disgusted by the hypocrisy of the Morales government, which has continued to cut spending on youth and social programs while militarizing the country to terrorize poor communities. “The people are present, and have no president,” chanted the protesters on Thursday.

The Guatemalan daily *La Hora* reported last November that the conditions at the Virgen de la Asunción center were truly horrendous. The 748 internees, crowded into a facility built for 400, lacked hygiene products like toothbrushes and toilet paper, while several children were sleeping on the floor.

The Public Ministry was reportedly investigating one murder case and several lawsuits regarding beatings, psychological and sexual abuse against girls and boys, and reports of sexual slavery administered by the guards at the facility. *La Hora* writes that there had been 73 disappearances since the beginning of 2016 until October, when a state prosecutor recommended shutting down the center.

Surrounded by tall prison-like walls with barbed wire and security cameras, the “safe houses,” like many

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other overcrowded shelters, prisons, schools and even hospitals, with one or few gates, are deadly disasters waiting to happen from fires, landslides and earthquakes.

In its 2016 operative program, the Social Welfare Secretariat (SBS) writes that the state serves, though in mostly inadequate ways, 8 percent of the 300,000 children and adolescents suffering from "discrimination, marginalization, mistreatment." They also write that 6.25 million or two-thirds of all children and adolescents live in "total poverty," making them vulnerable to such abuses.

The social conditions for a majority of youth and workers in Guatemala and the region are disastrous. Eighty percent of chronically undernourished children in Latin America live in Central America and Mexico, a condition that affects 45 percent of children under five in Guatemala, according to UNICEF figures.

The SBS requested about $33 million for yearly operations, but the Guatemalan Congress has approved only about two-thirds of this for several years. On the other hand, the military budget has increased almost 40 percent since 2011 to $280 million, mainly for the creation of a Mountain Operations Brigade, Marine Infantry Brigade, Jungle Operations Special Brigade and a Central Regional Command.

Moreover, according to the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the Guatemalan government has one of the lowest overall rates of social spending, and spends the least in the region as a percentage of GDP in the provision of education (0.51 percent) and health care (0.49 percent) for its youth.

The agency also reports that the government has the highest level of uncollected income taxes in the region, amounting to 70 percent of its potential tax revenue. Social polarization has been the overriding factor behind the social conditions for workers and youth. Oxfam calculates that the wealth of 260 multimillionaires in Guatemala is equivalent to 60 percent of the country's GDP.

While the City of Guatemala sees 65 percent of violent crimes and most gang activity that threaten to ensnare youth, the rural areas are affected by 86 percent poverty and rampant drug trafficking and production. At the root of these desperate conditions, like those that produced the disastrous events in the Virgen de la Asunción home, is an economic system based on the pursuit of profit and personal wealth by capitalist corporations.

The current levels of inequality and violence are the result of a long history of US and European imperialist exploitation in collusion with a rent-seeking and corrupt national bourgeoisie. The polarization of wealth was greatly accelerated with the implementation of IMF austerity diktats, like regressive taxes in 1983, social cuts, and widespread privatizations starting in 1986 under the "civilian" government of Vinicio Cerezo, after a decade of brutal military dictatorships.

These right-wing measures were intensified after the formulation of the Washington Consensus in 1989 and amid mounting interest payments to the international credit agencies. Throughout the previous decade, the ruling class enforced social cuts to finance an escalation of the counterrevolutionary civil war against left nationalist guerrillas that had raged since the 1950s as a result of the US-orchestrated military overthrow of the bourgeois reformist government of Jacobo Árbenz in 1954.

Between 1970 and 1975, there were about 15,000 political assassinations against radicalized youth, workers and peasants. Entire Mayan villages were destroyed during the 1980s, resulting in the genocidal killing of 200,000 people by the US-backed armed forces as part of "counterinsurgency" military operations.

The protracted state violence since the Civil War and the expansion of gang activity, along with the growing social inequality, have set the stage for the mass migrations of families and unaccompanied children into the United States.

The fire in Guatemala City underscores the criminality and disastrous consequences of the White House drive to detain and deport millions of immigrant workers and youth back to these social conditions that they escaped by fleeing from in Guatemala and the region.

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