

Indonesia: At least 47 dead in Jakarta factory fire

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A massive explosion and blaze swept through a fireworks factory at Kosambi in Tangerang, a satellite city on the outskirts of Indonesia's capital, Jakarta, last Thursday. Most of those trapped inside were killed or suffered horrific burns.

Of the 103 workers thought to be in the plant, at least 47 died inside the factory and 46 were injured. The workforce was largely composed of women, teenagers and at least three under-age children. A 14-year-old girl was among the dead.

Tangerang police chief Hary Kurniawan has stated that the death toll is likely to rise as a result of the severity of burns suffered by the injured. According to doctors, many have burns to 80 percent of their body and are in a critical condition. At least 10 more workers are unaccounted for.

Angry and distraught relatives crowded three hospitals in the area searching for their family members last week. They were well aware of the appalling safety record of the plant, and previous fires in similar facilities. Indonesian authorities are notorious for failing to enforce basic safety regulations in the country's many sweatshops.

Photos from the scene have pointed to the conditions that led to the tragedy. They show a confined space in which over 100 workers were operating in close proximity to dangerous materials.

Most of the victims were burned beyond recognition. Jakarta police medical and health division chief Umar Shahab said DNA testing and dental records will be required for their identification.

A large explosion, sounding like a massive bomb occurred at around 8:30 am local time. Police said it was caused by a spark from welding in the warehouse section, igniting gunpowder used in the production of fireworks. A fire rapidly spread and the roof collapsed.

Panicked workers tried to escape.

Witnesses have stated that the front gate, the only exit from the factory, was closed, preventing workers from escaping. One police account denied this, but authorities have confirmed that most of the bodies were found stacked in one area of the factory, indicating that the workers were trapped.

The devastating impact on the local community was underscored by a report in the *Jakarta Post* on Saturday.

Twenty of those killed and four injured came from the nearby Gang Pipa neighbourhood in the village of Belimbing. Sutisna and his wife Rohini were among those killed along with 18 of their neighbours. Sutisna was foreman at the factory. When it began operations six weeks ago, he invited his neighbours to work there.

The factory was owned by Panca Buana Cahaya Sukses (PBCS). The local Metro TV reported that, while the factory had a permit, the establishment of a fireworks factory near a residential area was contrary to existing regulations.

The authorities have sought to scapegoat individuals for the blaze, in order to obscure the safety violations that are abetted by the authorities.

Police named three "suspects"—factory owner, Indra Liyono, the company's operational director Andri Hartanto and the welding equipment operator Subarna Ega. The first two have been interviewed by police and Ega has not been located.

The suspects face the possibility of being charged with workplace negligence causing death, punishable by a maximum of five years imprisonment and a fine of 500 million rupiah (\$US37,000).

However, the causes of the catastrophe lie in the ruthless exploitation of workers in so-called developing countries such as Indonesia.

The factory was set up to quickly exploit new opportunities in fireworks manufacture. In 2014, 600 billion rupiah (\$US44.261 million) was being spent in Indonesia on fireworks but most were imported from China and Japan.

The state-owned PT Pindad munitions manufacturer developed plans in 2014 to expand from military products to large scale fireworks to exploit the lucrative market. Other investors have followed suit.

The workforce for these profiteers is readily available, as seen by the women and children marched by poverty from the Gang Pipa neighbourhood into the PBCS death trap.

The Indonesian economy has grown 500 percent since 1998. According to World Bank figures, this was largely based on the exploitation of cheap labour by domestic and foreign capital.

Some 80 percent of Indonesians, or 205 million people, are worse off than 20 years ago. Over 100 million live below or just above the meagre official poverty line of less than \$2 per day.

Some 54 percent of the workforce is employed in the largely unregulated “informal” sector of the economy, where wages are as low as one third of those for comparable jobs in the “formal” sector.

From 2003 to 2010, the bottom 40 percent of the population increased its consumption by just two percent. In 2014 the richest 10 percent of the population consumed as much as the bottom 54 percent. Meanwhile one percent of the population controls 50 percent of national wealth.

The growth of social inequality has been accompanied by ever-more dangerous work conditions. In 2015, an estimated 2,300 workers perished in industrial accidents.

There have been a number of industrial fires in Indonesia this year affecting the poorest workers in Jakarta:

* On New Year’s Day, 23 people perished when an inter-island ferry caught fire travelling from Jakarta to Tidung Island.

* On January 19, a fire in the historic Senen Market in Central Jakarta destroyed three blocks and 500 vendors’ kiosks. It was the eighth major fire at the markets since 1974.

* On June 22, a fire swept through the Kebayoran Lama market, killing a young boy, causing one billion

rupiah in damage and destroying the homes of 80 residents.



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