India: Fourteen die in Mumbai fire

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At least 14 people were killed and another 21 injured in a fire that swept through a building housing the "1 Above" rooftop bar-restaurant in Mumbai, Indian's financial centre, late last week. The tragedy further highlights the indifference of Indian authorities toward safety in public places and factories.

The fire began during the early hours of December 29 in a commercial building in the Kamala Mills compound. The fire department was alerted at around 3 a.m. The compound is home to several corporate offices, high-end pubs and restaurants in an upper-class night-life area.

Eleven of those killed were women celebrating the birthday of 29-year-old Khushboo Mehta Bansali, who was also among the dead. Two US residents, who had re-entered the restaurant in an attempt to rescue their aunt, died in the fire. Officials said all the victims were unable to find an exit and suffocated.

According to reports, the fire started at 1 Above on the top floor and spread to the neighbouring Mojo Bistro. Fueled by bamboo and other flammable materials, such as tarpaulin sheets and artificial flowers in both restaurants, it engulfed the entire building in less than 30 minutes.

Several media outlets, including three national news channels, had offices in the building that were damaged. If the fire had occurred during the day when people were working, the death toll would have been much higher.

While both restaurants had been served with safety violation notices in recent months, the relevant municipal authorities allowed them to continue operating.

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) chief minister Devendra Fadnavis of Maharashtra state, where Mumbai is the state capital, immediately ordered Mumbai municipal commissioner Ajoy Mehta to conduct an inquiry into who was responsible for the incident.

Given the outcomes of previous official inquiries, the aim of the investigation will be to cover up and exonerate those politically responsible while pinning the blame on a handful of scapegoats. Mehta quickly suspended five Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) officials, and assistant municipal commissioner Prashant Sapkale was transferred.

Fadnavis said the five officers would be charged with criminal offences if they were found guilty of permitting the restaurants to continue operating. "The owner-directors of the rooftop restaurant," he said, "are facing the charge of culpable homicide."

1 Above owners—Hitesh Sanghvi, Jigar Sanghvi and Abhijit Manka—issued a statement declaring that "all our premises are well inspected and we have all the requisite permissions." In India, as in other countries throughout the region, it is not difficult to secure fraudulent certificates by bribing officials.

A *Hindustan Times* article said the fire raised "concerns over fire-safety norms in the city's commercial hubs." In fact, it appears that the fire was a disaster waiting to happen.

BMC officials admitted that the 1 Above restaurant was taken to court on three occasions between May and September for safety violations. Media reports also state that in August, BMC demolished part of a common balcony extension of the two restaurants, and in October, the council raided and confiscated the furniture placed in the balcony. Despite this, the restaurants were allowed to remain open.

The restaurants did not have emergency exits and, according to officials, lacked proper fire safety equipment. Such violations are not accidental but commonplace throughout India. Under India's pro-market reforms, all safety concerns have been subordinated to profit.

In an attempt to hoodwink the population, India's BJP Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted:

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“Anguished by the fire in Mumbai. My thoughts are with the bereaved families in this hour of grief. I pray that those injured recover quickly.”

The government’s real attitude was expressed by BJP parliamentarian Hema Malini, who declared that the fire was a result of overcrowding in Mumbai and there should be population “restrictions.”

While the blame game continues, the BMC is demolishing “illegal structures” across the city in a desperate attempt to convince residents that it is concerned about public welfare and safety. NDTV reported that over 500 buildings have been destroyed.

Fire disasters are common throughout India. A few weeks ago, on December 18, 12 migrant workers were burned to death when a fire broke out in a snack shop in an industrial area in Saki Naka, Mumbai. While fire fighters eventually brought the blaze under control, only nine of the 21 people inside the shop managed to escape. The remainder were trapped inside the small structure, which collapsed after gas cylinders exploded. Because the victims were poor labourers, the incident attracted little media attention.

One of the worst disasters occurred in April 2016 in the south Indian state of Kerala. Ninety-eight people were killed and over 540 injured after thousands of fireworks exploded in a temple storeroom. Tremors from the explosions were felt a kilometre away. Journalists reported that it looked like a war zone, with temple buildings destroyed and remains of dead bodies scattered everywhere.

After last week’s blaze a December 30 editorial in the *Hindu* acknowledged that Indian authorities had turned a blind eye to the ongoing disasters. Successive governments, it declared, had “learnt nothing from the Uphaar cinema hall fire in New Delhi in 1997 that killed 59 people” and “orders issued to ensure public safety… remain mostly on paper. It should worry us that the lives of Indians seem to be of little value.”

The truth is that safety measures are grossly inadequate. The current BJP-led administration and the previous Congress governments have failed to improve safety standards, defending an economic and social system that puts private profit before the lives of people. Everything is being done to maximise foreign investment and ensure business profitability.

This situation is not limited to economically backward countries. The loss of 12 lives in a New York apartment building fire, a day before the Mumbai tragedy, demonstrates that the subordination of human life to corporate profit is a universal phenomenon.

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