

Indian factory fire kills 17 workers

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An explosion and fire at a fireworks packaging factory on January 20 in the Bawana industrial district, northwest of New Delhi, killed at least 17 workers and seriously injured two others who jumped from the building's second floor.

The fire began in a ground floor storage area and quickly spread throughout the building, which then collapsed. Although the cause of the fire is not yet known, police suspect it was the result of an electrical short-circuit.

Some of those killed were women and children who were trapped inside the building because illegal constructions blocked their escape, one fire official told the media.

Indian police released the names of seven women killed—Baby Devi (40), Afshana (35), Sonam (23), Reeta (18), Nadeen (55), Rakho (65) and Dharma Devi (45). Police are still attempting to identify other victims.

Fires and other social catastrophes are frequent in the poverty-stricken and overcrowded district. The area was established in 2010, after government authorities ejected tens of thousands of shanty town dwellers from Yamuna Pushta in New Dehli in preparation for the Commonwealth Games.

In 2013, a fire incinerated 800 shanty dwellings, killing two children and one woman. In April 2017 one man and two children died in another fire.

Commenting to the media on the latest tragedy Anwar Ali, a local street trader, said: "Fire accidents aren't accidents, they're the norm in places like Bawana."

Grief-stricken relatives of victims spoke to the media.

Mubeena, whose mother Madina has not been found, said: "We used to work together at a water bottle packaging factory. Around 15 days ago, she changed jobs. The previous one required heavy lifting and she was getting old. My mother and I were the main breadwinners [for the family] but how will I be able to manage, with her gone?"

Bantu Lal, 45, who was waiting for news about his 23-year-old daughter, Sonam, said: "This was her first job

[and] and she was due to be married in a few months. She wanted to work, so she could pitch in with the expenses."

According to press reports, the fireworks factory operated illegally. The building owner had a licence for a plastics facility but rented the building to Manoj Jain who early this month established a fireworks packaging plant. It employed some 40 workers, including children. Jain was arrested and detained by the police, pending a court appearance.

It is illegal to manufacture, import, sell or use explosives without authorisation. North District magistrate Sakshi Mittal said the plant ran without a licence or adequate safety measures.

The case has been transferred to India's Crime Branch for a "detailed investigation." Desperate to deflect popular anger, the government ordered an inquiry and quickly offered 500,000 rupees (\$US7,845) in compensation for the family of each killed and 100,000 rupees for the injured.

Three women left the factory an hour before the explosion, following a dispute with a supervisor over the lack of basic safety equipment. One told the media: "Employees spent close to seven hours filling gunpowder into small packets—without masks and protective clothing apart from a pair of gloves.

"I told the supervisor that we could not work in these conditions, and they should give us our wages. Three of us took 600 rupees in all and left. The air inside was making me cough. While leaving, we tried to persuade two other women to leave too, but they did not."

Meenakshi Lekhi, an MP from the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), attempted to blame the Delhi government's labour department, saying it was "responsible for ensuring that no explosives are manufactured."

Delhi industries minister Satyendar Jain washed his hands of any responsibility, declaring that it was the fault of the municipal corporation, which "could shut down any illegal factory but did not prevent the [illegal] business from continuing."

The fireworks packaging workers were paid just 200 rupees per day, with a monthly income of about 6,000 rupees. Most worked 12 hours per day—from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.—and were paid an extra 3,000 rupees a month for the overtime.

An estimated one million workers are employed in the Savakis industrial zone in Tamil Nadu, the centre of India's fireworks industry, with an estimated 700 legal and 1,200 illegal factories.

Most employees are women, youth and children. They work without formal training or safety equipment and suffer from asthma, eye complaints and tuberculosis.

According to the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, 90 child labourers in Tamil Nadu's fireworks industry have health problems. The workers are generally employed on a “piece-rate” basis, with children paid 30 to 50 rupees (\$US47 to 78 cents) per day.

Explosions, fires and building collapses are commonplace in India's fireworks industry because of poor safety standards. Last June, 25 workers were killed and 10 injured after an explosion at a fireworks factory in Kheri village, Madhya Pradesh. Five workers were killed in a blast in northern Uttar Pradesh in November. In October 2016, another 20 people were killed in a fireworks factory explosion in Tamil Nadu.

These disasters are not limited to the fireworks industry. In recent industrial accidents, 13 garment factory workers died after fire broke out last November in Ludhiana, Punjab. In the same month, 26 workers died and more than 100 were injured in a fire at a state-owned power plant in Uttar Pradesh.

In its ongoing efforts to attract foreign investment, India's BJP government plans to water down the country's limited labour regulations, guaranteeing that the number of people killed and maimed in industrial accidents will increase.



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