

Over 40 workers killed in Indian factory fire

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At least 43 workers were killed in a massive fire at a four-storey factory building in New Delhi, early Sunday morning. More than 50 workers were injured in the blaze, with some of them in a critical condition. It was second most deadly fire in the capital's history.

About 200 people were reportedly sleeping at the time when fire broke at about 5 a.m. Those rescued were rushed in auto rickshaws or three-wheeler taxis to the RML, LNJP and Hindu Rao hospitals, according to fire officials. All the victims were poor migrant workers from the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in northern India. The youngest was 13 years old and the oldest 51.

Doctors confirmed that smoke inhalation was the primary cause of the deaths. Some of bodies were charred beyond recognition.

About 150 fire fighters struggled for five hours in a narrow lane to douse the blaze and prevent it from engulfing other buildings in the congested area. Two firefighters were injured. Media reports describe "chaotic scenes" as grief-stricken and shocked relatives of the victims rushed to the site to search for their loved ones.

Manoj, 23, whose brother was working in a handbag manufacturing unit operating from the premises, told the *Indian Express*: "I got call from his friend saying he has been injured in the incident. I have no idea which hospital he has been taken to."

The *Times of India* reported that Mohamed Mahbub, 13, was pronounced dead on arrival at the LHMC Hospital. No trace had been found of his 14-year-old brother who also worked at the factory.

A desperate Wajid Ali from Samastipur told the *Times*: "My cousin Mohammed Atamul, who is about 18 years old, I saw his body. And my two brothers—Sajid (23) and Wazir (17) are untraceable."

Each floor of the building, which was located in Anaj Madi on Rani Jhansi Road, had four to five rooms and

contained a range of illegal manufacturing units. The ground floor made plastic toys; the first floor was involved cardboard manufacturing; the second floor had a garment workshop; and the third floor produced jackets and also had printing facilities.

According to fire officials, preliminary investigations suggest that the early morning blaze may have been triggered by an electrical short circuit.

Delhi Fire Service director Atul Garg told the *Indian Express* that the building was old and did not have fire safety certification or fire safety equipment. Firemen had to cut window grills to access the building.

Garg said that about 60 people, most of them contract labourers and factory workers, were asleep in the building when the fire began. He said that four fire-fighting units were rushed to the site, then another 30, but only one unit was able to get into the congested laneway.

More details about the disaster emerged on Sunday evening after the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) team entered the building and discovered high levels of hazardous carbon monoxide fumes.

NDRF deputy commander Aditya Pratap Singh told the *Press Trust of India* that the entire third and fourth floor of the building had been "engulfed with smoke" and that most of workers in the illegal manufacturing units had died of suffocation. "There was a room, where most of the workers were sleeping, which had only a single space for ventilation," Singh said.

Police arrested the building owner Rehan and his manager Furkan on Sunday. They were charged under sections 304 (culpable homicide not amounting to murder) and 285 (negligent conduct with respect to fire or combustible matter) of the Indian Penal Code.

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal rushed to the devastated building and declared that the "guilty will not be spared." He ordered a ministerial inquiry into the disaster, and in a desperate attempt to dissipate mass

anger, announced compensation of one million Indian rupees (\$US14,000) to the families of the deceased and 100,000 rupees to each family of the injured.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi offered 100,000 rupees compensation to the next of kin of those killed and 50,000 rupees for the seriously injured. Modi issued a perfunctory Twitter message describing the fire as “extremely horrific” and declaring that his “thoughts are with those who lost loved ones.”

These hypocritical statements and the meagre compensation are a desperate attempt by Modi and Delhi territory leaders to deflect attention from their political responsibility for the tragedy. Territory and local government officials have also sought to offload blame on each other.

Sanja Singh, an MP from of Delhi’s ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), questioned the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, which is ruled by Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party. Singh asked why the council had not shut the factory when it knew it was operating illegally and did not have fire clearance.

Delhi Congress Committee President Shubash Chopra denounced the AAP and the BJP, declaring that “they are equally responsible.” Chopra’s statement is a shameless attempt to deflect the blame from Congress, which has held power for decades.

The entire political establishment and the Indian capitalist class, which have created the sweatshop conditions that produced this fire, are directly responsible for this and numerous similar disasters throughout India. The latest tragedy has occurred as the Modi government is stepping up its efforts to boost “investor sentiment” by abolishing India’s limited but hard-won labour laws.

Notwithstanding the finger-pointing and statements of “concern,” the aftermath of Sunday’s fire will see no change in the dangerous conditions and the brutal exploitation of the Indian working class. The entirely preventable fires and other disasters will continue.

The list of deadly fires in Delhi over the past two decades includes:

* In 1997, 59 people were killed in a fire at Uphaar Cinema in New Delhi.

* In August 2009: Scores of patients were evacuated after a fire broke out near the emergency ward at Delhi’s AIIMS. While there were no casualties reported, the fire severely damaged the structure. The

Microbiology department’s virology unit on the second floor of the teaching block was completely gutted.

* In November 2018: Four people were killed and one person injured after a fire broke out at a factory in central Delhi’s Karol Bagh.

* In February 2019: At least 17 were killed and 35 injured in fire at the Hotel Arpit Palace in Delhi’s Karol Bagh area.



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