# Hospital fire in southern India kills 10 COVID-19 patients

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A massive fire at a hotel-turned hospital in Vijayawada, a major city in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, last Sunday morning has killed 10 COVID-19 patients and injured 30.

The tragedy follows the August 6 fire that killed eight people in the intensive care unit of a private COVID-19 designated hospital in Ahmedabad, the largest city of the western state of Gujarat. With the pandemic spreading rapidly in the country, the circumstances of the fire point to criminal negligence on the part of governments and hotel and hospital authorities.

Last Sunday around 5 am, a fire broke out on the ground floor of the Swarna Palace hotel COVID-19 facility and quickly spread to the upper floors of the five-storeyed building. When the fire erupted, around 30 patients and 10 medical staff were on the premises.

As reported by *Indian Express*, the victims of the fire are: Dokku Siva Brahmaiah (58) of Machilipatnam, Potluri Poornachandra Rao (78) of Ghantasala mandal, Krishna district,

Majji Gopi (54) of Machilipatnam, Sunkara Babu Rao (68) of Vijayawada, Kosaraju Suvarnalatha (42) of Ponnur, Guntur district, Maddali Ramesh (57) of Vijayawada, Sabbithi Ratna Abraham (48) of Jaggaiahpet and his wife S Rajakumari (40), Duddu Venkata Narasimha Pavan Kumar (30) and his mother Duddu Venkata Jayalaxmi (48) from Kandukur of Prakasam district.

Post-mortems confirmed that eight out of the ten victims had recovered from COVID-19 and tested negative. They would have been discharged in a couple of days and been with their families again.

Fire department officials told the *Week* they received a call at 5.09 am informing them about the fire raging inside the hotel. The officials estimated that the fire must have started at around 4.30 am on the ground floor. By the time fire engines arrived at the hotel, the flames had spread to the first and second floors.

Six fire engines were pressed into service to douse the flames. The firemen found that most of the people on the first two floors were still in their beds and had passed away due to suffocation.

The fire was brought under control within 45 minutes. Those occupying rooms on the fourth and fifth floor and those who escaped to the upper floors managed to save their lives. At least seven patients jumped from the terrace as the flames spread to the upper floors. Two others were asphyxiated as thick fumes enveloped the hotel, the *Indian Express* reported.

Fire officials told the media that the cause of the blaze was an electrical short circuit. The wooden flooring, waste dump and electronic items on the ground and other floors fuelled the spread.

According to Fire Safety Director Jairam Naik, the makeshift hospital had "violated" safety rules. The fire department confirmed that hospital management did not obtain an NOC (No Objection Certificate) before converting the hotel into a COVID facility.

The police complaint filed by revenue officials claimed that hotel management knew about electrical defects in the premises but failed to rectify them as it would have involved large expenses. The same officials charged that Ramesh Hospitals, which leased the hotel, used the facility despite knowing this safety risk.

Within 24 hours of the fire, the local police arrested three Ramesh Hospitals officials, including the Chief Operating Officer, for allegedly neglecting the need for electrical repairs that could have averted the disaster.

The evidence, however, indicates that the officials who were meant to check the fire safety requirements at such buildings looked the other way while hospital management breached basic safety norms.

In an obvious attempt to contain popular anger over the resulting loss of lives, the state and central government authorities responded as they usually do. Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy announced an ex-gratia payment of 5 million rupees to the next of kin of victims. Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted his "anguish" about the incident and offered "all support."

The *Indian Express* reported that the National Disaster Response Force, the State Disaster Response Force, fire service and police personnel who participated in the rescue operation urged their higher officials to send them to special quarantine as they had been exposed to COVID-19.

"When we requested our higher-ups in this regard, they told us to undergo home isolation," one officer said. "This won't help in preventing the virus from spreading to our families if we are affected."

The callous attitude of higher officials toward personnel who were exposed to the coronavirus flows from the class response of the Indian ruling elite as a whole to the pandemic.

Having ignored the danger of COVID-19 for more than a month, Modi's government was finally forced to implement a nationwide lockdown on March 24. However, that lockdown proved an utter failure. This was due to its ill-prepared nature, particularly the government's refusal to provide for the basic necessities of the people who were forced to stay in, and to take other vital measures such as mass testing, contact tracing and proper quarantine.

Moreover, in line with its policy of placing the profit interests of big business over the lives of workers and the rural poor, Modi's government reopened the economy by "unlocking" its lockdown from late April, leading to a rapid spread of the pandemic throughout the country. Now, according to even substantially under-reported official figures, the number of confirmed coronavirus cases in India is over 2.3 million, with more than 46,000 deaths.

Andhra Pradesh, the only southern state to record 10,000-plus daily cases on more than one occasion, witnessed a new single-day high of 10,820 infections last Sunday, propelling the state's overall tally to 227,000. With 97 new deaths, the loss of lives in the state rose to 2,039.