

Grenfell-like fire at tower block in Milan, Italy endangers hundreds of lives

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Dozens of people were evacuated and hundreds made homeless after a fire ripped through a 20-storey apartment block in Milan, northern Italy, on August 29.

Events at the tower block, known as Torre dei Moro, are strikingly reminiscent of the catastrophic Grenfell Tower inferno, which took place in London just over four years ago, killing 72 men, women and children under entirely preventable circumstances. Video footage of the Torre dei Moro fire shows the entire tower engulfed in flames, with smoke billowing across the city. Fortunately, no deaths or serious injuries were reported.

Although the exact details of the Milan fire are yet to be established, it is thought to have been caused by a short-circuiting electricity supply on the 15th floor. Flames rapidly spread both up and down the building, consuming the entire structure within less than 30 minutes.

The apartment block has been left uninhabitable, with photos from inside the building revealing a blackened shell, with rubble and destroyed furniture strewn across the floor. There are concerns that the building could be at risk of collapse as high temperatures have possibly melted steel beams supporting the structure.

Seventy-four residents had to be evacuated from the building, with about 20 of them suffering from mild smoke inhalation. After being rapidly alerted about the fire by an inhabitant of the 16th floor, who posted a message on the building's group chat and knocked on neighbours' doors, most residents were able to quickly and safely leave the building using largely fire-resistant and smoke-excluding stairwells.

Torre dei Moro is thought to have accommodated 70 families, many of whom were reportedly not present at the time of the fire, meaning that the number of individuals left homeless could be in the hundreds. Many of the displaced families are being housed in hotels near to the site of the blaze, while others have been taken in by friends and family.

Four years on from the Grenfell Tower disaster, events like the Torre dei Moro blaze are a further exposure of the ruling elite's criminal disregard for the lives of the working class globally. Decades of deregulation and cost-cutting have endangered or cost the lives of workers in factories, hospitals, tower blocks and other residential buildings across the world. While luckily no fatalities occurred in the Milan fire, events could easily have taken a catastrophic turn. Hundreds of lives have nonetheless been upended and years of precious family possessions lost.

Questions are already being raised about the lack of fire safety regulations and equipment at the tower block, with many parallels drawn with the deadly events at Grenfell. Residents have reported faulty fire alarms which failed to ring when pulled, while firefighters responding to the blaze have stated that fire extinguishing systems in the building did not properly work and that water did not flow through fire hoses installed there.

A 50-metre-tall aerial ladder, brought by firefighters and which would have been capable of reaching the top of the tower, could not be used due to a lack of suitable spaces to set it up. Had assisted evacuations been necessary, firefighters' inability to use this apparatus would have severely hindered rescue efforts.

Reports have also emerged that sprinkler systems in the building failed to operate on the majority of the floors. While sprinklers on the first five floors, and two basement levels, worked well, this system did not activate between floors five and 10, media reports have recounted. Above the tenth floor, the system operated only partially.

Particularly devastating in light of the Grenfell fire are reports that flammable cladding was used at Torre dei Moro, enabling flames to rapidly spread around the outside of the building. Combustible Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) panels used on Grenfell Tower were the most significant factor in allowing flames

to swiftly consume the entire 24-storey building in less than 20 minutes.

Witnesses reported that the panels coating Torre dei Moro “burnt like cardboard.” Speaking to the *Corriere della Sera* newspaper, one resident said, “We were told that the panels covering the building were fireproof, instead they melted like butter. I remember perfectly, we were assured that the panels were fire resistant.”

While it is not yet clear exactly what type of cladding was used on Torre dei Moro, most reports indicate that some form of ACM cladding with a polyethylene core was likely used.

In an interview with the *Corriere della Sera*, Angelo Lucchini, Professor of Technical Architecture at the Milan Polytechnic, explained that the flammable cladding was chiefly responsible for the rapid spread of the fire. “The facade of the building was built with combustible materials,” Lucchini told the newspaper. “Unfortunately there is no law that prohibits it.”

Comparing the Milan fire to events at Grenfell Tower, Lucchini continued, “there is a strong analogy between the two events. Fortunately in the Milanese case, there were no problems with evacuation, probably because construction rules for compartmentalisation were respected, which prevented flames from attacking internal floors. In London, however, they weren’t, and it was a tragedy.”

Another factor, according to reports, that may have played a major role in facilitating the spread of fire at Torre dei Moro was the cavity between the walls of the building and the panels, leading to a so-called “chimney effect”. As at Grenfell, this allowed flames and heat to travel vertically both up and down the tower in a short amount of time.

Many residents spoke to local and national newspapers about the devastating impact the fire has had on their lives. “There are 70 families without a home; we’re back to square one,” explained one resident of the Torre dei Moro high rise. “I lived on the fourth floor. There is nothing left of the building.”

“We are homeless; we want justice,” stated Silvana and Carmelo, two residents of the apartment building.

“We went down the 11 flights of stairs [to the exit]... and we saw that there were flames on the fifteenth floor,” the couple continued. “In less than half an hour, actually in a few minutes, there was a match effect. I hope that the judiciary quickly investigates because we’ve been left without a home. A 10-year-old apartment block has ended like this. We residents want justice.”

That the inferno did not lead to a catastrophic loss of life is largely down to luck. Unlike the Grenfell fire, the blaze at Torre dei Moro took place at around 5 o’clock in the afternoon, meaning many residents were already out of the building and those inside were awake and able to evacuate quickly. By contrast, the inferno at Grenfell took place in the middle of the night, with many inhabitants not waking up until it was much too late to leave the tower.

Importantly, however, as fire safety expert Angelo Lucchini noted, internal compartmentalisation regulations had largely been respected at Torre dei Moro, meaning flames were not able to breach the inside of the building and spread from apartment to apartment at the same rate as at Grenfell. Stairways had largely been sealed off from the rest of the building, allowing residents to evacuate by this route without succumbing to the deadly effects of smoke inhalation.

While Milan’s prosecutor’s office has opened an investigation into the Torre dei Moro fire, no trust should be placed in the ruling elite to secure justice and compensation for those who have been made homeless. Like countless other “inquiries” and “investigations” before it, it will prove to be a cover-up intended to protect the corporate and political culprits who bear chief responsibility for the destruction.

The Grenfell Inquiry has been going on for four years, despite a wealth of information being in the public domain from day one as to the identity of the culprits responsible in corporate and political circles. The building was clad in highly flammable material in order to save money, turning a safe building into a death-trap during a “refurbishment”.

The inquiry set up by Theresa May’s Conservative government under Labour’s 2005 Inquiries Act “has no power to determine any person’s civil or criminal liability.” No-one is being prosecuted as the Metropolitan Police long ago declared that its own “investigation” would wait until the inquiry finished and produced its report before even considering doing so. The inquiry may not even conclude next year, five years after the fire.



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