Deadly fire in Taiwan leaves nearly 50 people dead

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A fire broke out in a working-class apartment building in the southern Taiwan port city of Kaohsiung early Thursday morning, killing at least 46 people and leaving another 41 injured. The exact cause of the fire, which resulted in the second-highest death toll of any building fire in Taiwanese history, is still under investigation, but the disaster highlights the difficult and dangerous conditions faced by workers and the poor in Taiwan.

The 13-storey dilapidated building was a 40-year-old mixed-use building, common throughout Asia. Once a department store, the converted structure known as the Cheng Chung Cheng building contained 120 units and was home to many of the poorest in the city, including disabled and elderly residents. The building, located in the city's Yancheng district, had been partly abandoned.

Witnesses reported hearing an explosion, with people in the building screaming 'fire' around 3 a.m. on Thursday. The fire was not put out until about 7 a.m. Many of those who died on the upper floors were killed by smoke inhalation. Three people who died were from the Chinese mainland.

Local residents described the structure as a "ghost building," according to the *New York Times*. Abandoned sections were used by gangs, reportedly engaging in criminal activity, while stairwells and hallways were piled high with garbage and had exposed wiring.

One survivor, 58-year-old Huang Chin-chih, who was not home at the time of the fire, told the media: "I was afraid of this ghost building, but I had no choice but to live here. I'm just feeling lucky I was not there that night." Huang paid a third of her monthly salary, approximately $US100, for a one-room apartment in the building.

The fire reportedly started on the first floor. At present, a resident and his girlfriend are under investigation and were questioned by prosecutors on Friday. The couple had supposedly fought the previous day. No details have been announced, but authorities are suggesting that arson could be a cause of the deadly blaze. Kaohsiung police chief Huang Ming-chao said burned incense was discovered where the fire supposedly began, though it is unclear how this might have contributed to the disaster.

What is known, however, is the building did not meet fire safety standards. The bottom six floors had originally been used for commercial purposes, but had become derelict. These floors were filled with flammable materials that greatly exacerbated the intensity of the flames, according to Kaohsiung mayor Chen Chi-mai. Kaohsiung fire chief Lee Ching-hsiu also reported that the construction materials were not up to fire safety standards and contributed to the spread of the blaze.

Taiwan's *United Daily News* reported that fire extinguishers were installed only last month, but there were just three per floor, as the residents could not afford to pay for more. This highlights the subordination of public safety to profit. The basic right to protection from disasters like fire is made available only to those who can afford it.

Mayor Chen offered crocodile tears at a news conference. "For the families and Yancheng, I feel incomparable pain and I blame myself deeply," he stated. "Here I want to express my deepest sorrow to all the wounded and those who died, as well as their families and all the residents."

Politicians from both the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), including President Tsai Ing-wen and the opposition Kuomintang, offered similar

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empty words. However, nothing will change after the deadly blaze.

"The problem is not just the fire, but the many structural issues that lie behind the fire," Chen Liang-Chun, an adjunct professor of urban planning at National Taiwan University, told the *New York Times*. "In Taiwan, it is always like this. Natural hazards happen all the time, but man-made factors are what turn those hazards into disasters."

In fact, on Friday, Kaohsiung officials already reported that there were at least 34 "high risk" older buildings in the city, indicating that the problem is widespread. Undoubtedly, there are many more similar buildings throughout the island that also pose significant safety risks. City officials said they would investigate these buildings for fire code violations.

None of this means any real changes will be coming for those living in the most vulnerable conditions. City officials claimed that they had investigated the Cheng Chung Cheng building four times since 2019, though no major steps to improve safety were taken.

"This building was a tumor of Kaohsiung," said Hong Xian-kai, who ran an antique shop on the destroyed building's ground floor, near where the fire reportedly started. "No one managed it, and no one cared about it."

Regardless of how the fire began, the living conditions the residents faced were created by capitalism, which is defended by both the local and central governments. The couple allegedly involved, or anyone else who can be used as a scapegoat, will be demonized in the press in order to divert attention from the social conditions and avoid making any changes that would undercut the drive for profits.

Many workers and poor are unable to find or afford safe places to live as housing prices rapidly grow. A poll conducted at the end of September by the minor opposition New Power Party (NPP) found that 82.6 percent of people believed housing prices were unreasonably high. The NPP postures as a non-aligned "third" party in Taiwan, but is in fact a supporter of the ruling DPP.

While housing in Kaohsiung remains difficult for workers to find, the city is welcoming the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), the world's largest semiconductor manufacturer, with open arms. TSMC is expected to expand into Kaohsiung, setting up new plants beginning in 2023. The resulting speculation has further driven up housing prices in the area.

As has happened globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a sharp rise of social inequality in Taiwan, even according to recent official data released by the island's Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics (DGBAS).

In 2020, income inequality on the island was the highest in eight years, with the top 20 percent of households earning 6.13 times the bottom 20 percent, according to the DGBAS. The agency said disadvantaged employees had been hit harder by the economic fallout from the pandemic, with many of them asked to take unpaid leave, for example.

Accessing safe and affordable housing is a growing problem not only in Taiwan, but in many cities throughout China, including in Hong Kong. While governments and politicians seek to drive wedges between workers in Taiwan and the mainland, and whip up animosities to justify war plans, the working class faces similar conditions throughout the region and the world.

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