Deadly fire in Osaka, Japan leaves at least 24 people dead

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A fire in Osaka, Japan has left at least 24 people dead and four injured, including three in critical condition. The fire began Friday morning in a psychiatry clinic on the fourth floor of the eight-storey Dojima Kita Building, a multiuse facility in the city's Kita Ward. The fire is the worst in Japan since a 2019 fire in Kyoto killed 36 people and injured another 34 at an animation studio.

Authorities are treating the fire as suspected arson. It began in the Nishi-Umeda Clinic for Mind and Body for Working People around 10.20 a.m. and was extinguished approximately 30 minutes later. The clinic specialized in treating people with depression, panic attacks, and other issues. Clients who spoke to the media stated the clinic was popular and offered support for people returning to work after sick leave.

More than 70 firetrucks and ambulances responded to the blaze, which destroyed the fourth floor of the building. At present, authorities believe the fire started when a man, thought to be in his 60s and a patient at the clinic, ignited a flammable liquid concealed in a paper bag near a heater at the clinic's reception area. A woman told police that "strong flames burst out of the paper bag as a man put it down" near the reception desk. Another person reported that "fluid was coming out of the paper bag." Fire officials reported finding traces of oil in their investigation.

Authorities believe that the alleged arsonist is among those severely injured in the hospital. He has not been arrested. However, police did search the man's home on Saturday where a small fire was also reported shortly before the one that began at the clinic.

As the fire began near the clinic's entrance, it likely blocked any escape route. In addition, the thick smoke that quickly filled the area left people unable to find their way in the clinic. As a result, most of the victims died from smoke inhalation. A witness at the scene told Japan's national broadcaster, NHK, "There was a lot of dark smoke…there was a very strong smell, too."

Regardless of how the fire started, the high death toll points to flawed safety measures. Presently, officials have stated that the Dojima Kita Building, constructed in 1970, had no prior violation of fire prevention codes. However, whether or not the bare minimum legal requirements were followed does not mean safety standards were adequate.

Safety experts have questioned what measures should have been taken to prepare for a fire. Yuji Kumamaru, who runs an emergency response and disaster prevention consultancy firm in Tokyo, told the *New York Times*, "My initial thought was that the building construction design itself is the most important factor." He said that older buildings often do not have the recommended two exits per floor or interior fireproofing. The elevator and emergency stairs were both located outside the clinic where the fire started. That emergency exits in buildings are mere recommendations is a clear indication of the lack of regard for fire safety.

Furthermore, the building lacked sprinklers, which are not legally required given the size of the building and the number of floors. In Japan, only buildings taller than 11 storeys are required to have sprinkler systems installed. As a result, landlords and construction companies can cut costs by not installing this basic safety measure in new buildings or being required to add them to existing buildings.

The necessity of sprinkler systems was tragically confirmed in the 2019 fire at the Kyoto Animation studio, which was only three storeys high. Shinichi Sugawara, an expert in structural fire engineering and professor emeritus at Tokyo University, said at the

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time, “I personally think that all places like (the studio) should have (fire) shutters, and all buildings should have sprinklers, regardless of size.” These words have clearly not been heeded.

Following the latest fire, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida offered the same empty words people have heard time and again from leaders around the world when these disasters occur. Speaking in Tokyo, Kishida stated, “A very tragic incident occurred. First of all, we must make efforts to prevent a recurrence by grasping the actual situation and clarifying the cause and circumstances. I pray for the souls of those who have died, and extend my deepest sympathies to those who have been injured or harmed.”

As in the case of the Kyoto fire, however, none of the underlying causes of the latest inferno are likely to be addressed and rectified.

The exact reasons and possible motivations for the fire are not yet known. However, if the allegations against the current suspect prove true, the tragedy does point broadly to sharp social tension and the conditions millions of workers in Japan must endure. And while this does not justify or excuse the deadly actions taken, it demonstrates the extreme breaking points to which people are being pushed.

In addition to the long and stressful work hours and low pay common in Japan, people have suffered through attacks on their jobs and living conditions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Older people and the elderly have been particularly hard hit by the pandemic, many of whom had already suffered from loneliness and social isolation. Mental illness in Japan also carries a strong stigma and many are reluctant to seek or receive help.

So severe is the problem that the Japanese government appointed a “Minister of Loneliness” in February this year. Speaking on the issue, Takako Suzuki, a member of the National Diet’s lower house from the ruling Liberal Democratic Party stated in April, “A prevention viewpoint is significant when taking countermeasures against loneliness and isolation. It is important that the expansion of a consultation system, which will become a safety net, and preventative measures are pushed forward together as one set.”

This, however, is not taking place. Whatever cosmetic measures the government has taken will do nothing to address the real issues that stem from the fact that under capitalism all aspects of life are subordinated to the drive for profit.

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