

Apartment fire in China exploited to push for ending COVID restrictions

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28 November 2022

On Thursday, November 24, a fire at a high-rise apartment in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang Province in northwestern China, led to 10 deaths and 9 injuries. This tragedy, largely caused by serious fire hazards in the neighborhood's infrastructure, has been seized upon by the Western media to demand further lifting of Zero COVID measures in China.

The fire started from a power strip in the bedroom of an apartment on the 15th floor of a 21-floor building in a residential compound named Jixiangyuan. The blaze engulfed bedding and furniture in the room and spread up to the 17th floor, while the smoke went all the way to the 21st floor.

The fire station in Urumqi was notified of the incident at 7:49 p.m. and arrived at the fire in five minutes. According to the press conference held by the city government, the fire was finally under control at 10:20 p.m., two and a half hours later. Ten people, including a three year old child, died from smoke inhalation while nine others were hospitalized.

Questions were immediately raised about the almost three-hour delay between the arrival of the fire truck and when the fire was put down. How did it happen and how much did it contribute to the deaths?

Video footage taken by residents of nearby buildings showed that the fire truck parked at the entrance of the residential compound. The firefighters were attempting to spray water onto the building from a distance but the water seemed not able to reach the flames.

The same press conference explained that the driveway into the compound was very narrow. With multiple cars parked on the curbside, it was difficult for large vehicles like a fire truck to pass. There were also metal curb bollards standing in the way that took time to be removed. One video did show staff in white hazmat suits trying to break the bollards near the

entrance of the compound.

On China's social media, various rumours have been spread by those hostile to the government's zero-COVID-19 policy. The most widespread rumour on social media has been that quarantine and partial lockdown measures have prevented residents from escaping the fire scene. It was claimed that the building door was locked by health officials for quarantine purposes and that fire fighters wasted too much time removing fences propped up at the gate to seal the compound.

These rumours can be refuted with video footage and accounts from neighbours. The road bollards had been there for years and were meant to limit access of vehicles, not pedestrians. Accounts from at least three witnesses who lived in a building next door, including one volunteer assisting the rescue of residents, all verified that their residential compound was not under a strict lockdown and people could come downstairs. In fact, there were residents who escaped the building from its entrance after the fire started.

This disaster is clearly rooted in the disregard for fire safety which is prevalent, not just in Urumqi but in many residential areas across China. Blaming the deaths on COVID restrictions does no justice to the victims, but rather lets the ones who are truly responsible go free.

The US and international media have sought to exploit the tragic incident to further its campaign for an end to China's zero-COVID policy by blaming COVID restrictions. The *New York Times*, for instance, in its article "Protest in Xinjiang against lockdown after fire kills ten", regurgitating uncritically the claims of Chinese social media commentators suggesting the lockdown slowed efforts by firefighters to extinguish the blaze.

“The descriptions of residents possibly sealed into their homes or compounds fit a broader pattern of how such lockdowns have been enforced in many parts of the country. Makeshift barricades and bolted doors have become a key feature of efforts to prevent people who might have been exposed to the virus from leaving their homes and buildings,” the *New York Times* declared without a shred of evidence.

The *New York Times* also used the tragedy to further US denunciations of China over the lie that it is carrying out genocide against ethnic Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang. The article quoted Tahir Imin, a Uyghur exile and founder of *Uyghur Times*, declaring that “[The Chinese government has] showed that they don’t care about the lives of the Uyghur people.”

The *NYT* attempted to paint the outbreak of small-scale confrontations and protests since the fire as an expression of mass sentiment against the zero-COVID policy.

In fact, videos showed that the protest on Thursday evening involved just a few score of people, and their demand of “ending lockdowns” are not shared by the broader population. The protestors are largely from a relatively small section of the middle-class and upper middle-class that considers the Zero COVID policy an inconvenience to their life and a “violation” of their “personal freedom”.

It is understandable that there are growing complaints against the COVID restrictions after Urumqi has been put under partial lockdowns since August. There is still widespread understanding that the public health measures, despite the inconveniences and sometimes difficulties, are implemented to protect the lives of hundreds of millions.

However, the nationalist basis of the government’s Zero COVID policy means that the pandemic will never truly end when the virus can spread freely across the rest of the world. Without the international elimination of the virus, the result leads to never-ending lockdowns and mass testing.

The Beijing regime is under an immense pressure, both domestically and internationally, to abandon the COVID restrictions and fully reopen its market. The recent “Twenty Measures” that relaxed many key public health measures manifests Beijing’s adaptation to this pressure. Under this shift away from elimination and under the pressure from criticisms over the fire, the

Urumqi city government followed suit in announcing on Saturday that the virus has been “socially eliminated” and restrictions will be gradually lifted around the city.



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