

# Explosion at Thailand fireworks factory leaves 23 workers dead

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An explosion at a fireworks factory in central Thailand on Wednesday at 3:30 p.m. killed at least 23 people. While the precise cause of the explosion is not yet clear, the devastating accident highlights the precarious conditions many Thai workers face and the overall subordination of workplace safety to the pursuit of profits.

The facility where the explosion occurred was located amid rice fields in Sala Khao, a rural area of Suphan Buri province roughly 120km north of Bangkok. The plant was a farmhouse which had been converted to produce small fireworks for farmers to use to scare birds away from crops, a common practice in Thailand. Workers at the factory were reportedly making a 600-700 baht daily wage, or less than \$US20. There are several other firework production plants in the area.

Images of the facility in the immediate aftermath of the explosion show thick plumes of black smoke billowing from the site. Footage of the aftermath shows a decimated lot with building materials littered over the area and only distorted, steel building frames standing.

According to authorities, there were no survivors following the explosion. For this reason, the exact cause of the explosion will likely take time to discover, according to national police chief Police General Torsak Sukvimol. Continuous explosions prevented nearby residents from approaching the factory or attempting any type of rescue. They reported no one exiting the facility. The owner survived as he was reportedly delivering goods to customers.

Bodies were transferred to a nearby temple by ambulances for identification. The victims include seven women and 16 men. Only 20 have been properly identified thus far. The factory employed about 30 people, meaning the death toll could rise. The blasts were so devastating that remains of the deceased were

found throughout the neighboring area, including a worker who was flung at least 50m into a nearby rice field.

The governor of the province, Natthapat Suwanprathip, visited the area for an inspection with government agencies. Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin was also informed of the explosion while abroad for the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland.

Srettha's office released a statement, saying, "The prime minister ordered an inspection of the plant to see if it was operating legally and if the explosion was caused by negligence. The law must be enforced to the fullest extent because there are innocent deaths and injuries."

Such remarks are entirely empty and are typical of capitalist politicians around the world following devastating workplace accidents and preventable deaths in natural disasters. Nothing will be done to address safety in Thailand's fireworks industry or on job sites throughout the country generally.

In fact, the factory where Wednesday's explosion occurred had a track record for unsafe conditions. On November 20, 2022, an explosion at the plant left one person dead and three injured, reportedly caused by an open fire from a charcoal stove that spread to a pile of gunpowder.

This did not prevent the facility from obtaining a new operating license in July last year. Don Samitakestarin, the deputy provincial governor, claimed, "This business operation complied with all the regulations from the Interior Ministry, so we had to give it a license."

The size of the destroyed factory also prevented even limited safety regulations from being applied to it. The approximately 30 workers employed at the factory produced fireworks by hand. Industrial regulations only apply to those businesses employing 50 workers and

which use some form of machinery.

The fireworks industry in Thailand more broadly is no less dangerous. Between 2008 and 2023, there were 24 explosions at fireworks factories and warehouses, resulting in large-scale losses of life. On July 29 of last year, for example, a large explosion at a fireworks warehouse in Narathiwat, in southern Thailand, killed 11 and wounded 389. It occurred in a residential area and damaged 649 houses and three schools. According to the governor, it was caused by sparks from construction welding.

Many of the facilities that produce fireworks in Thailand do so while ignoring safety regulations and standards. Often times, proximity to homes and other businesses raises the risk that explosions or fires will have an even more devastating impact on local residents.

Sonthi Kotchawat, an environmental and health expert, explained to the *Bangkok Post* that even following the explosion at the fireworks warehouse last July, nothing has been done by government agencies to address safety issues. This means that not only did the unsafe status quo continue in the lead-up to Wednesday's accident, but that more accidents are likely to occur.

This approach to safety is the norm in Thailand. Since the country's deadliest fire accident killed 188 workers at the Kader Toy Factory in Nakhon Pathom province in 1993, politicians have claimed that steps were taken to address workplace safety.

However, many workers are forced to labor in conditions that stand outside even these limited labor laws, demonstrating that no section of the country's ruling elite intends to truly address safety in any sector. As of 2021, the most dangerous jobs in the country were in building construction when 4,516 workers were either injured or killed. Another 2,014 workers were injured or killed in Thailand's auto industry, which is the tenth largest producer of vehicles in the world.

Throughout the Indo-Pacific, workplace accidents in the fireworks industry are also rampant, with Thai workers and others throughout the region facing many of the same exploitative conditions. Last October in Tamil Nadu, India, two factory explosions killed 14 people and in central China in July, five people were killed in a similar accident.

The global fireworks market is worth at least \$US2.7

billion and is expected to reach \$US3.8 billion by 2031. About 90 percent of the world's fireworks are produced in China. While Wednesday's explosion took place at a factory typically producing fireworks for farmers, it occurred at a time of high demand for such goods, just prior to the Lunar New Year in February, an important holiday in the Asia-Pacific.



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