

Dozens killed, hundreds missing in Hong Kong inferno

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A huge blaze has engulfed a complex of residential high-rise towers in the northern New Territories district of Hong Kong. At the time of posting, the death toll stands at 44 but is almost certain to rise further, as 279 people are still unaccounted for. Currently 68 people are in hospital, 25 in a serious condition and another 16 classified as critical. Some 900 people are in emergency shelters.

The fire began yesterday afternoon local time just before 3 p.m. in one of eight 31-storey towers in the Wang Fuk Court complex in Tai Po, and spread to all but one of the towers as a result of high winds. The buildings, which were undergoing renovations, were all surrounded by bamboo scaffolding and construction netting that likely contributed to the speed at which the blaze spread.

By 6:22 p.m., the emergency alert was raised to the highest level—5. There were 128 fire trucks, 57 ambulances and 767 firefighters deployed to the blaze. They battled the inferno in very difficult conditions throughout the night. One firefighter, 37-year-old Ho Wai-ho, has died and another has been injured.

Derek Armstrong Chan, the deputy director of fire service operations, described the conditions facing firefighters. “Debris and scaffolding of the affected buildings [are] falling down. The temperature inside the buildings concerned is very high.” He said that it was difficult to reach the upper floors, where the temperature was the most intense.

The fire risk in Hong Kong has been “extreme” for most of the past week because of dry conditions. Red Fire Danger Warning was in force yesterday, according to the Hong Kong Observatory, a government weather service, and remains in place.

The cause of the fire has yet to be determined, but the use of substandard and flammable materials by the

company carrying out renovations and repairs contributed to its spread. Three men—two directors and a consultant of the construction company—have been arrested by police on suspicion of manslaughter.

“We have reason to believe that the company’s responsible parties were grossly negligent, which led to this accident and caused the fire to spread uncontrollably, resulting in major casualties,” Eileen Chung, a Hong Kong Police superintendent, told the media.

Hong Kong Secretary of Security Chris Tang told the media that police had discovered “exterior netting, tarpaulin and plastic sheeting that burned far more intensely than permitted materials.” In the one unaffected tower, styrofoam had been stuck to window frames.

Fire Services Director Andy Yeung said the styrofoam panels were extremely flammable and would have caused the fire to spread far more quickly from flat to flat within each of the towers.

The estate had been inspected in 2016 and found to require mandatory large-scale repairs. The owners’ corporation decided last year on a plan costing \$HK330 million (\$US42 million) that included the rebuilding of external walls. Work on the repairs and renovation began in July 2024.

The deadly fire points to the dangers of the widespread use of bamboo scaffolding in Hong Kong. According to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, industry estimates from January suggest that 80 percent of major construction and renovation projects used bamboo scaffolding, which is lighter but above all cheaper than the steel alternative.

In March, the Hong Kong government started to phase out bamboo scaffolding, citing worker safety. Between 2019 and 2024, there were 22 deaths

involving bamboo scaffolders. The proposal, however, only applies to public building projects, and then only to 50 percent of such projects from March onwards.

In comments to the *South China Morning Post*, Gary Au Gar-hoe, spokesman for the fire engineering division of the Hong Kong Institute of Engineers, explained that bamboo scaffolding and the attached netting could catch fire. He said the fire in Tai Po reportedly began at the scaffolding on the lower levels of one of the buildings before spreading upwards to higher levels and into residential units inside.

Au said the Building Department's guidelines mandate the application of a fire retardant layer on the netting. While the chemical coating can retard a fire and eventually put out the flames, if the fire is strong enough the netting can still help fuel the blaze. "The [bamboo] scaffolding is flame retardant, but not non-combustible," he said.

The engineer also pointed out that radiant heat from the intense inferno could have caused adjacent buildings to ignite. He agreed that the scale of the fire pointed to potential deficiencies in one or more areas, including the fire safety materials used in the scaffolding, fire safety management during the building works, and awareness among workers.

The fire in the Wang Fuk Court complex is Hong Kong's deadliest since at least August 1962, when a blaze in the city's Sham Shui Po district killed 44 people. A fire at the Garley Building on Nathan Road in Kowloon in November 1996 killed 41 people and injured 81.

The Wang Fuk Court complex, which was built in 1983, is government-subsidized housing aimed at alleviating the heavy burden of housing costs in Hong Kong, notorious for being one of the most expensive cities in the world in which to live. Even then, applicants have to meet strict requirements and often wait for years before getting an apartment.

Already comparisons are being drawn with the inferno that engulfed the Grenfell Tower, a council housing complex in London, killing 72 people. As in Hong Kong, the working-class residents were living in a death trap after the local Conservative-run authority presided over a cosmetic facelift that cut corners to save money. The building was fitted with combustible cladding that allowed the fire to jump from floor to floor and created enormous difficulties for firefighters.



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