

Death toll in Hong Kong fire rises to 94, hundreds still missing

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27 November 2025

The fire that destroyed seven high-rise residential buildings in Hong Kong is nearly extinguished, after burning for more than 36 hours. At 9 a.m. Hong Kong time, the Fire Department announced that 94 people had died and 76 were injured.

Those numbers will only continue to rise. The number of missing has not been updated by authorities in 24 hours and still stands at 279. It is now the worst fire in Hong Kong's history since a warehouse fire in 1948 killed 176 people.

The Wang Fuk Court apartment complex in Tai Po caught fire in the mid-afternoon on Wednesday. The complex was under renovation. Like so much of the rest of Hong Kong its buildings were encased in bamboo scaffolding and green mesh netting. The immediate cause of the fire has not yet been uncovered, but once it began, it tore through the scaffolding and netting that surrounded the structures at breathtaking speed, engulfing seven towers in the conflagration.

Surviving residents report that fire alarms did not go off. The windows were encased in highly flammable styrofoam. A elderly survivor told the press that his home had been entirely dark, the windows covered from the outside with styrofoam. He had glimpsed the fire through a chink in the styrofoam covering his bathroom window and managed to evacuate. Others would not have seen the fire at all.

Prestige Construction and Engineering Company, the firm in charge of building maintenance at the estate, appears to have used illegal, unregulated materials, including styrofoam and flammable mesh. The Hong Kong Labour Department only keeps a record of the past two years' infractions by companies on its website, but even in this limited window, Prestige was convicted of two safety offenses on other construction sites in November 2023. It was operating 11 ongoing construction projects at residential estates.

Police arrested two company directors and one consultant from Prestige Construction on suspicion of manslaughter. They seized bidding documents, a list of employees, and computers and mobile phones during a raid on the construction company's offices.

Flame-resistant mesh costs \$HK90 per sheet, flammable mesh, illegal on any building over four stories, costs \$HK50. It is probable that illegal cost-cutting measures, designed to save \$HK40 (about \$US4.50) per sheet, rapidly spread the fire

through seven of the eight Wang Fuk towers.

Residents report that they repeatedly complained of infractions. They also allege that Prestige was awarded the contract despite making the least competitive bid, which strongly indicates wider corruption and collusion.

The Labour Department reported that it had warned Prestige of fire hazards at Wang Fuk Court a week before the blaze. On three occasions, warnings of labour safety violations were issued since July last year.

This begs the question: why was nothing done? What is the significance of repeated government warnings if, when no changes are made, the only outcome is additional warnings. While details remain murky, it is clear that there was, at a minimum, a great deal of government laxity in corporate oversight and regulation, if not outright complicity in the violations.

Tai Po, located in the northern New Territories of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, is a predominantly working class and lower income community, with over 320,000 residents. Many of these residents live in government-subsidized housing estates, such as Wang Fuk Court.

The dead are disproportionately the elderly and the very young. A 2021 government census revealed that of the 4,600 residents of the complex around 40 percent were over the age of 65. On an ordinary day the elderly can be seen congregating in the park, playing mahjong in the shade, and gathering for morning tai chi; old women care for their grandchildren, old men fish in the nearby Lam Tsuen river.

According real estate listings, the average size of the floor area of the nearly 2,000 units in the complex, which was constructed in 1983, is 420 to 480 square feet (39 to 44 square metres). These are multi-generational homes. Many house a married couple whose joint income supports everyone, the grandparents, and children.

The grandparents care for the very young until they are old enough to go to school, while both parents are at work. When the senior members of the home are no longer able to sustain this role, a maid—Filipino or Indonesian—is often hired to live in the home, caring for the elderly and infants.

The time of the outbreak of the fire means that most of those trapped in the units were grandparents and toddlers. The Hong

Kong news carried the heart-rending footage yesterday of a working mother learning that her elderly mother-in-law and infant daughter were dead.

At least one Filipino and two Indonesian maids died in the fire. At least eight migrant workers are still missing, according to the Asian Migrants Coordinating Body. The actual numbers are doubtless higher. Facebook posts among the domestic worker community contain appeals to locate those who are missing along with the infants for whom they cared.

Scores of domestic workers are reported as having survived according to their consulates and are now in evacuation shelters. Their visas are contingent upon employment and they will almost certainly be sent home by the Hong Kong government.

Over a thousand residents now reside in evacuation centers and emergency shelters, sleeping on the floor. Many are still frantically inquiring after missing loved ones. There has been an outpouring of support from ordinary people throughout Hong Kong, supplying donations and coordinating aid.

Government aid to the victims has so far been paltry, bordering on insulting. City chief executive John Lee Ka-Chiu pledged that the government would create a \$HK300 million (\$US39 million) fund to assist the victims, including a cash handout of \$HK10,000 to each household. That is the equivalent of one month's rent for a 300-square foot unit. To move into a unit in Hong Kong requires paying first and last month's rent, a one-month security deposit, and half a month's rent to the realtor, three and half times the amount of aid the government is offering.

Each family of victims, Lee added, would be assigned a case worker, and would be provided with two weeks accommodation in a hostel or hotel. The victims have not only lost loved ones, they have lost everything they owned. They wear hand-me-down clothing supplied by community donations. And all the Hong Kong government is giving them is two weeks accommodation and a month's rent.

The housing crisis is one of the defining social features of Hong Kong, which is consistently one of the most expensive cities in the world. Seven and half million people live in about 80 square kilometers of housing. The hourly minimum wage in Hong Kong is \$HK42.1 an hour, having gone up just \$HK2.1 in 2025, a rise of about 27 US cents.

The housing crisis in Hong Kong is not the product of overpopulation, but of extreme inequality and real estate speculation.

Hong Kong is home to a significant segment of the world's mega-rich. The rich live in multi-story homes, sometimes even entire medium-rise buildings dedicated to a single family. A single wealthy family may employ 20 or 30 domestic workers: drivers, nannies, cooks, a crew for the yacht. They live on the Peak, or the finance district of Central, they shop for Gucci and Prada in the malls of Tsim Sha Tsui, the most expensive real estate in the world. Maserati and Lamborghini sports cars are

not an uncommon sight on the streets of Hong Kong, a city with a highly efficient public mass transit system, where it is difficult to ever drive more than 60 kilometers an hour.

Meanwhile, 220,000 people live in rented spaces, known as "cage homes," that are smaller than the standard Hong Kong parking space. The number of such subdivided units is growing, particularly in older, working class neighborhoods like Sham Shui Po. A small electric fan and a rice cooker at the foot of the bed, stacks of neatly folded clothes and other slight mounds of possessions sit atop the sheets in the windowless rooms. Each bed space is enclosed in a cage that can be locked when the resident is away from "home."

The average wait time for public rental housing in Hong Kong is five and a half years. The wait time is growing longer, not shorter. People plan their lives around the application process: young people delay marriage, unhappy couples avoid divorce.

The system of public housing in Hong Kong began after another catastrophic fire in the slums of Shek Kip Mei on Christmas Day in 1953 that left 53,000 people homeless. Needing to shelter the working population, and feeling the ideological and political pressure of the victorious Chinese revolution just across the border, the British colonial government created tenement housing, allocating 120 square feet to each unit, with a system of communal restrooms and wash areas. These were homes, but their architecture resembled prisons.

Current subsidized housing rents at about 30 to 40 percent below market rate, but market rate is among the most expensive in the world. It takes an entire month's income for a family to pay for subsidized housing; they must live, pay school expenses for children, save for college, conduct their lives out of a second or third income.

Grief over such catastrophes turns to anger. As it is for the working class around the globe, the social and economic conditions in Hong Kong are explosive, and outrage is coming to the surface.



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