

Death toll reaches 128 in horrific Hong Kong apartment fire

Kevin Reed

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At least 128 residents are confirmed dead in the fire at Wang Fuk Court, a public housing estate in the Tai Po district of Hong Kong. Approximately 200 people remain missing and unaccounted for as firefighters and recovery teams comb the charred towers.

Local and international reports indicate that the victims range from young children to elderly pensioners, including at least one firefighter, and that the estate—home to roughly 4,600 people—housed predominantly low-income families and older residents in cramped apartments.

A BBC report said, “Some 2,311 firefighters worked to bring the fire under control after it spread across seven of Wang Fuk Court’s eight apartment blocks.” The Fire Services Department reported that the blaze was fully extinguished at 10:18 a.m. on Friday, after roughly 43 hours of firefighting.

Rescue crews have shifted from active firefighting to systematic search, recovery and support operations. They are moving through the towers flat by flat, forcing open doors to look for victims, recovering bodies and checking any remaining “unresolved” emergency calls from residents who phoned for help during the blaze.

At the same time, specialist teams are working to stabilize the buildings, monitor hot spots to prevent reignition and support police and investigators, who are documenting the scene and gathering evidence about how the fire spread.

Many of the dead and missing lived in the mid- to upper floors of the blocks that were most heavily wrapped in scaffolding and polystyrene-sealed windows, where smoke and flames cut off stairwells and trapped entire households.

The Wang Fuk Court inferno in Hong Kong is the territory’s deadliest residential fire in more than 70 years, a man-made social crime caused by the capitalist system. A profit-driven renovation, official negligence and systematic degradation of public housing have exposed the reality facing Hong Kong’s working class.

This includes overcrowded estates swathed in flammable construction materials, disabled safety systems and a state apparatus that protects contractors and speculators while sacrificing tenants’ lives.

Although an official investigation is underway, what is already clear is that this was not a natural disaster but the predictable outcome of a dangerous renovation regime and a gutted safety infrastructure.

The blaze erupted on the afternoon of November 26 in one of the Wang Fuk Court blocks under heavy exterior works, rapidly climbing the bamboo scaffolding and plastic mesh that cocooned the estate’s towers.

Initial investigations and media reports point to highly combustible materials—polystyrene or Styrofoam boards used to seal windows, non-compliant mesh and plastic sheeting around the scaffolding—that acted as fuel and vectors for the flames, allowing the fire to jump vertically and horizontally across the façade in minutes.

Residents and former security staff have said that the fire alarm system in at least one block had been intentionally disabled months earlier to facilitate contractor access, while multiple survivors report that no alarms

sounded, and emergency lighting failed as smoke poured into corridors.

Footage and eyewitness accounts describe flames and burning debris cascading from the exterior works, smashing windows and driving superheated gases into the flats, while escape routes were choked by black smoke.

The dense mesh and boarded-up windows not only accelerated the blaze but also obstructed residents’ attempts to signal for help or reach fresh air, forcing some to crowd onto tiny balconies or attempt desperate climbs along the scaffolding.

Firefighters faced extreme heat, falling debris and narrow, cluttered interiors, further delaying rescue efforts in towers that had been transformed into vertical fire traps by cost-cutting construction methods.

Hong Kong’s authorities, under conditions of mounting public anger, have been compelled to move against sections of the construction industry while seeking to shield the role of state agencies, developers and political parties that greenlighted the renovation.

The BBC reported:

Eight people have been arrested on suspicion of corruption over the renovation works the blocks had been undergoing before the fire. Three others were detained earlier on manslaughter charges.

Those detained are senior figures linked to the contractor responsible for the exterior works at Wang Fuk Court, including two company directors and an engineering consultant. The firm had a record of prior safety breaches, and its executives are accused of using hazardous, non-compliant materials and disregarding written warnings from regulators about fire risks.

The *New York Times* and Reuters confirmed that the renovation company is Prestige Construction & Engineering Co. Limited, but the firm could not be reached for comment. The eight other individuals are reported to be linked to renovation management and site supervision.

The Labour Department and relevant building authorities have admitted that they conducted at least 16 safety inspections at Wang Fuk Court between July 2024 and November 2025, issuing six improvement notices and initiating three legal actions against the contractor.

Residents had repeatedly complained from 2024 onward about the flammable green mesh and the accumulation of cigarette butts and debris on the construction platforms, but officials insisted that the netting was certified as “flame-retardant” and allowed work to continue with only minor corrective orders.

Even as late as November 20—days before the inferno—the authorities carried out another inspection and issued written warnings but did not halt the works, revoke permits or compel removal of the combustible cladding and foam that turned the estate into a tinderbox.

In their public statements, senior Hong Kong officials have combined

rote expressions of sympathy with platitudes about “lessons learned,” while treating the disaster as a regrettable aberration rather than the product of systemic capitalist neglect.

The city’s chief executive, John Lee, confirmed that the Wang Fuk Court blaze was the deadliest fire in decades and promised a thorough investigation, claiming that government agencies were “fully mobilized” to support affected residents and that safety checks would be expanded to other estates undergoing major renovations.

Fire and police officials have characterized the event as “a tragic incident” and a “serious case of suspected negligence,” stressing that investigators are examining whether substandard mesh, plastic sheets and other materials violated fire regulations.

Some officials have been quick to claim that preliminary tests show some scaffolding covers met existing codes, but these comments deflect responsibility from the regulatory agencies, which have permitted extensive exterior wrapping and plastic sheeting on occupied high-rise residential blocks.

Survivors and residents have responded with anger and grief, denouncing the catastrophe as preventable and condemning both the contractors and the government. Many of those who escaped report being awakened or alerted not by alarms but by the smell of smoke, the shouts of neighbors or the sight of flames racing up the building outside their windows.

One elderly resident told local media that he would “be dead” except for already being awake. Others trapped in upper floors described pitch-black corridors, the collapse of power and emergency lighting, and the terror of feeling their doors and metal gates grow hot as the exterior foam boards ignited.

Family members of the missing have gathered outside cordoned-off areas and temporary information centers, clutching photographs and demanding answers as the death toll rises. Many have spoken bitterly of earlier efforts to raise safety concerns and oppose the renovation scheme, only to be dismissed by the estate’s Owners’ Corporation or offered token concessions while the renovation went ahead.

Residents and volunteers interviewed in Tai Po have described the government as “inept” and insisted that this was “not an accident” but the result of greed and negligence. These sentiments are being echoed across social media in the slogan “It Is Not an Accident,” along with demands for an independent investigation.

Rescue and recovery workers, confronting a scene of mass death, have spoken of the extraordinary difficulty of their task. Firefighters have detailed how the combination of exterior scaffolding, burning debris and high internal temperatures forced them to proceed slowly, floor by floor, even as they knew large numbers of people were trapped above.

Emergency service briefings describe apartments gutted down to bare concrete, with entire families found huddled together in bathrooms and corners far from windows, having been unable to reach stairwells in time.

Medical staff at local hospitals report dozens of patients suffering from severe burns and smoke inhalation, many in critical condition, and warn that the final death toll is likely to climb as more victims succumb to their injuries.

For survivors, the immediate conditions are harsh and precarious. Hundreds of residents evacuated from Wang Fuk Court have been moved into temporary shelters and community halls, some sleeping on camp beds or mats in overcrowded sports centers and schools.

Local reports indicate that around 900 people have sought refuge at such facilities, reliant on food, water, clothing and basic supplies brought in by volunteers and charities as winter temperatures fall. The government has announced emergency housing assistance and the possibility of interim public rental units, but many families have lost all possessions, documents and savings in the fire, and face months or years of uncertainty about long-term rehousing and compensation.

According to a report in Heidoh, an independent AI-driven media platform for journalism and civic engagement across Asia, Wang Fuk Court estates had been undergoing extensive exterior repairs since mid-2024. The report said:

A June 2024 renovation program, valued at HK\$330 million (US\$42.4 million), required residents to pay HK\$150,000 to HK\$190,000 per unit. The plan was later revealed to be the most expensive of three proposals. After residents voted out the estate’s management committee in September 2024, discrepancies such as vague invoices and “miscellaneous” charges emerged.

The catastrophe has drawn hypocritical comments of concern from foreign governments, including the United States, where deadly disasters are commonplace. The Trump administration’s State Department issued formulaic remarks expressing condolences to the victims and “confidence” in Hong Kong’s ability to conduct a thorough investigation.

Non-governmental groups and local charities have deployed volunteers to Wang Fuk Court’s displaced residents, distributing blankets, heat packs, masks, clothing and portable chargers at shelters and ad hoc collection points.

Spokespeople for these organizations are emphasizing the psychological trauma facing the survivors, particularly children and the elderly, and are calling for increased funding and coordination to provide counseling, legal support and longer-term housing solutions.

The Wang Fuk Court inferno is the latest in a series of mass casualty fires, showing that decades of promises by Hong Kong officials have done nothing to stop them. In 1996, the Garley Building fire in Jordan, a section of Hong Kong, killed 41 people and injured 81 after welding sparks ignited combustible materials and bamboo scaffolding, prompting a raft of new regulations and safety procedures.

In 2011, a blaze linked to wiring at a hawker stall on Fa Yuen Street spread into adjacent buildings, leaving nine dead and over 100 homeless, amid complaints about obstructed exits and subdivided flats.

Three decades after Garley, the Wang Fuk Court fire, again involving scaffolding, unsafe construction practices and failures of enforcement, demonstrates that cosmetic regulatory tweaks cannot resolve the crisis rooted in the subordination of housing and urban safety to private profit.



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