

Horrific fire in Crans-Montana, Switzerland: No tragic accident, but manslaughter amid lust for profit

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The scenes that unfolded an hour and a half after the start of the new year in the Swiss ski resort of Crans-Montana resembled an apocalypse. Burning figures, disfigured beyond recognition, staggered out of the blazing bar “Le Constellation.” For many, any help came too late.

The preliminary toll is 40 dead and over 119 seriously injured. Most of those identified so far are under 26 years of age. The burns are so severe that the specialised hospitals in Lausanne and Zurich, to which the injured were flown by helicopter, did not have sufficient capacity. Fifty have since been taken to hospitals in Italy, France, Germany and Belgium.

They face months of suffering. Some have burns covering more than 70 percent of their bodies, which also affects their internal organs. In addition, they have severe lung damage from smoke inhalation. “At the moment, we are planning to take every patient into the operating room every other day,” the chief physician at the burn centre at the Children’s Hospital in Zurich told Swiss television. Those who survive this ordeal will face lifelong disabilities and disfigurement.

The fire spread rapidly through the two-story bar, which can hold 300 guests but was possibly overcrowded. Guests in the basement, where the fire broke out, had little chance of survival. The narrow staircase leading upstairs was blocked in the ensuing panic. An emergency exit was apparently not marked and was blocked by furniture and stored items.

Even some of the guests on the ground floor were only able to escape the inferno by breaking windows. Others were pulled out of the entrance area and into the open air by helpers. Eyewitnesses describe horrific scenes. “Faces were completely disfigured, hair had fallen out. People were burned black, their clothes fused to their skin,” is how one rescuer described the scene.

The bodies of the victims were so badly charred that, despite the efforts of 30 specialists, only 24 have been clearly identified so far. Among them are a 14-year-old girl and two 15-year-olds, the youngest victims so far. Of the 119 injured, 113 have been identified so far: 71 are Swiss, 14 are French and 11 are Italian; the rest are from other countries.

The immediate cause of the fire appears to have been largely clarified. So-called party fountains, which emit a bright flame from above, set fire to the sound insulation on the ceiling of the basement. Numerous cell phone photos and videos circulating on

the internet show waiters bringing champagne bottles decorated with burning party fountains into the room, guests waving them near the ceiling, and the fire finally breaking out.

After a short time, a so-called flashover occurred. This is when heat accumulation and the associated formation of gases in heated and burning objects trigger a fireball that sets everything on fire at once. A self-ignition mechanism is created that acts extremely and very quickly, raising the temperature to 1000 degrees Celsius. Escape is then impossible.

Consciously permitted manslaughter

Everything that is known so far about the cause of the fire confirms that the disaster was not a tragic accident, but consciously permitted manslaughter by the dozen. The “Le Constellation” bar was a highly flammable firetrap in which a New Year’s Eve party should never have been allowed to take place.

Basic fire safety measures were disregarded—from the highly flammable building materials and the lack of escape routes to the complete unpreparedness of the serving staff. Instead of evacuating the room in an orderly manner, they tried to extinguish the fire with primitive means while guests photographed and filmed them. Even fire extinguishers do not appear to have been available.

The Moretti couple, who have been running the bar for 10 years and are now being investigated by the public prosecutor’s office for negligent homicide, negligent bodily harm and negligent causing of a conflagration, are not solely responsible for this. No arrest warrant has been issued yet.

Government representatives and authorities are also responsible, as they granted the bar an operating license despite obvious deficiencies and turned a blind eye to fire safety issues. Talking to residents of other lucrative tourist destinations, it quickly becomes clear that Crans-Montana is not an isolated case. Lack of fire safety, blocked emergency exits and general irresponsibility are widespread.

Like many other sectors of the economy, the tourism industry is

under pressure from powerful profit interests that ruthlessly disregard human life. In this respect, the disaster in Crans-Montana is in line with the rejection of the zero-Covid policy by influential business circles, the genocide in Gaza, the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of young men in the war in Ukraine, the bombing of Iran, Venezuela and alleged drug traffickers by the Trump administration, and the reintroduction of conscription to provide cannon fodder for future wars. In all cases, profit and power interests take precedence over human lives.

Crans-Montana belongs to a US corporation

Crans-Montana has changed significantly since doctors sent patients to the village high above the Rhone Valley at the end of the 19th century to recuperate in the fresh air. It has become a fashionable ski resort frequented by the wealthy and famous, where lavish winter sports events are regularly held.

The ski area now belongs to the US corporation Vail Resorts, which two years ago bought all the lift facilities, the associated mountain operations, including four retail and rental stations, the ski schools and 11 restaurants from a Czech investor for 118.5 million Swiss francs. Vail Resorts, which already operates ski areas in the US and Andermatt-Sedrun in Switzerland, hopes to generate an annual profit of 30 million Swiss francs after initial investments in Crans-Montana.

There is a lot of money to be made from the wealthy clientele who can afford to vacation in exclusive Swiss ski resorts. But tourism is a tough business. Financial ruin is never far off. The business is dependent on the weather and the season, even though snow for the ski slopes is now produced artificially. The ski season lasts only four, at most five months, and the summer season is much less lucrative.

Bars, restaurants and hotels that want to hold their own in this harsh environment dominated by a major investor have to fight hard. And they need good connections to the relevant authorities.

Swiss federalism, which shifts numerous decisions and control functions to the cantonal and municipal levels, may appear democratic to the outside world. But it also means that “everyone knows each other.” A friend or relative in the government or in an authority can work wonders when you need a permit or want to circumvent regulations.

The Moretti couple, who come from Corsica in France, apparently had the necessary ruthlessness and toughness to hold their own in this shark tank. They also run other restaurants in the region.

Jacques Moretti renovated and converted the bar in Crans-Montana himself ten years ago, as older photos on Facebook show. Experts suspect that he used cheap polyurethane plastic as noise insulation in the basement to save money. Polyurethane is cheap, easy to work with and has good insulating properties, but it is highly flammable. If it catches fire, it burns fiercely within a very short time and develops toxic gases. It is therefore prohibited in catering establishments. However, fire-resistant insulation

materials are much more expensive.

If this suspicion proves to be true, the question arises as to why the fire safety inspectorate did not intervene, even though, according to Moretti’s own statement, it inspected the premises three times in ten years. The authorities are stonewalling on this issue.

At an internationally broadcast press conference on Saturday, at which representatives of the Valais cantonal government, the police, the public prosecutor’s office, hospitals and emergency services provided information, not a word was said about this. Even the question of when the last inspection of the burned-down bar had taken place was not answered. When journalists asked critical questions, the representatives of the government and police dropped their friendly facade and reacted brusquely and dismissively.

Senior public prosecutor Béatrice Pilloud promised that renovation work, materials used, operating licenses, safety measures, fire safety standards and escape and evacuation routes would be investigated. However, she did not provide any specific details, citing a lack of “reliable information.” Almost everything that is known so far about the course of the disaster has been uncovered by journalists.

The municipality, which is responsible for enforcing operating regulations for restaurants, is also blocking progress. At a press conference, municipal president Nicolas Féraud only vaguely mentioned inspections that had taken place “annually or biannually.” When the news magazine *Der Spiegel* wrote to Féraud to inquire further, he responded with insults: “Who are you to demand such a thing! I have the decency not to treat you as you deserve.”

Clearly, there is much to hide. Given the large number of victims and the scale of the disaster, the public prosecutor’s office may be forced to extend its investigation somewhat in order to minimise the damage to the tourism industry. But this will not change the fundamental problem that led to the disaster in Crans-Montana: the disregard for human life in the interests of profit.



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