

# Manslaughter charges filed over Hong Kong's Wang Fuk Court fire

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Hong Kong authorities have filed manslaughter and corruption charges against seven individuals and two companies over the Wang Fuk Court inferno in Tai Po, confirming that the city's deadliest residential fire in decades was the result of a criminal conspiracy of cost-cutting and fraud, not an unavoidable tragedy. The prosecutions, however, leave intact the broader social crime of a housing regime that condemns hundreds of thousands of people to unsafe, overcrowded and extortionately priced dwellings.

On 26 November 2025, fire erupted on the exterior scaffolding of the Wang Fuk Court estate, an eight-block complex housing thousands of working-class residents in Tai Po. Fed by substandard mesh netting and flammable foam insulation wrapped around the high-rises for a major renovation project, the blaze raced up the façades and into the apartments, engulfing seven of the eight towers and killing 168 people, injuring scores more and leaving some 1,800 households homeless in the worst fire Hong Kong has seen in generations. It was immediately clear this was no "natural disaster": fire alarms and smoke detectors failed across the estate, residents said bells never rang as smoke and flames swallowed corridors and stairwells, and survivors described being trapped in narrow, cluttered hallways crammed with combustible items that were never cleared despite repeated warnings.

After a months-long joint investigation by the police and the Independent Commission Against Corruption, the authorities announced on 10 June that they had filed 25 charges against seven people and two firms directly involved in the renovation. Will Power Architects Co., the consultancy hired to inspect and supervise works, and Prestige Construction & Engineering Co., the main contractor, both face multiple counts of manslaughter over the deaths. Three senior figures—Prestige directors Ho Kin-yip and Hau Wa-kin, and Will Power director Wong Hap-yin—have each been charged with manslaughter, accused of creating and overseeing a renovation scheme that turned the estate into a death trap.

The charges go far beyond negligence. Prosecutors allege that Will Power and Prestige conspired to defraud Wang Fuk Court's owners' corporation, rigging the tender process to guarantee Prestige a contract worth hundreds of millions of

Hong Kong dollars. Prestige's litigation history and poor record were concealed; its evaluation scores were secretly inflated so that it emerged as the "sole preferred" bidder in a field of dozens of contractors. The consultancy and its registered inspector are accused of filing sham inspection reports, certifying that fire-safety and maintenance works had been properly supervised when, in reality, inspections were cursory or non-existent. Wong, along with a subordinate and his wife, is accused of laundering some \$HK40 million in illicit proceeds over six years, while a close associate faces charges of attempting to pervert the course of justice by hiding bribe money and pressuring a registered inspector to falsify documents and mislead investigators after the blaze. These charges make explicit what residents already knew: that safety rules, inspection regimes and tender procedures were treated as obstacles to be circumvented in the pursuit of profit.

Yet these prosecutions, significant as they are, capture only a fraction of the criminal apparatus that produced the Wang Fuk Court disaster. Even before the fire, the building-maintenance sector in Hong Kong was notorious for bid-rigging, collusion and triad infiltration: competition authorities have exposed a vast syndicate coordinating "cover bids" across multiple estates, including Wang Fuk Court, so pre-chosen contractors could milk owners' corporations with inflated contracts. An industry insider told the local press that people with triad backgrounds openly boast that rigging maintenance tenders is more lucrative than the drug trade.

The independent committee has heard that residents were systematically misled by "expert" consultancy reports written by firms with undisclosed ties to the contractors they recommended, and that so-called competing bidders shared personnel and ownership links, suggesting under-the-table agreements to rotate contracts. The Housing Bureau's Independent Checking Unit, responsible for monitoring major renovation works, has admitted to "systemic loopholes": officials knew corridors were clogged with combustible items and alarms were defective, yet they failed to enforce remedial action, gave advance notice of inspections and now claim they had no mechanism to intervene—an admission that the regulatory framework itself functions as a shield for this corrupt maintenance regime.

Meanwhile, the survivors of the inferno continue to pay the price. Around 1,800 households—some 6,000 people—were evacuated and remain displaced, scattered among temporary accommodations, relatives' homes and hotels, with no clear timetable for permanent rehousing or return. Among the most severely affected are the foreign domestic workers—the maids—who lived and labored in Wang Fuk Court. Hundreds of helpers worked in the estate; at least 10 Indonesian and Filipino women were killed, and many more lost both their employers and their lodgings overnight. Hong Kong's immigration regime ties helpers' right to stay in the city to a specific employer and live-in arrangement, the death or displacement of their bosses meant instant unemployment and homelessness. Despite being hailed in the media as "heroes" for carrying children down smoke-filled stairwells and waking sleeping families, survivors have had to rely on migrant networks, churches and charities for shelter and basic necessities, all while facing the threat of deportation if they cannot quickly secure new contracts.

Compensation schemes underscore the class bias of the system. Families of foreign domestic workers killed in the fire are to receive about \$HK800,000 each in total statutory and ex gratia payments, a sum that cannot compensate for the loss of these women, who are routinely the sole breadwinners for children and elderly parents. Helpers who were injured in the fire are allocated at most tens of thousands of dollars, while those who were not injured receive a one-off grant and a small stored-value card—token amounts that do not address the loss of their jobs, housing and immigration status. Residents who lost their homes have received only limited, one-off subsidies, while the \$HK2 billion building insurance is primarily reserved for restoring the physical structures rather than directly compensating households for the loss of their flats, belongings and neighborhood. In this entire compensation architecture, the overriding concern of the authorities and insurers is to repair the asset and contain their financial exposure, not to fully restore the shattered lives and livelihoods of the working class.

The Wang Fuk Court charges thus sit atop a deeper social crime: a housing regime in Hong Kong that forces working people into outrageously expensive, inhumanly confined dwellings. In one of the world's richest cities, hundreds of thousands live in stacked wire-mesh bedspaces known as cage homes, subdivided flats, and overcrowded tenements. Recent legislative changes—phasing out the smallest subdivided units, tightening minimal standards and marginally reducing average waits for public rental housing—are touted as "bidding farewell" to cage homes. In reality, they leave the basic structure untouched.

Families still wait four to five years or more for a public flat, enduring extortionate rents and dangerous conditions in the meantime, while enforcement remains slow and heavily weighted toward landlords' interests. At the same time, the government has moved to "revive" the private property market by cutting stamp duties, easing mortgage rules and expanding

schemes that push public housing tenants into subsidized home ownership—a strategy designed to protect developers' profits and maintain housing as a speculative commodity. Within this framework, the privatized, syndicate-ridden maintenance regime is not an anomaly but a logical component: contractors and consultants scour the city's ageing estates for lucrative contracts, knowing that owners' corporations and nominal regulators can be bought, intimidated or outmaneuvered.

The manslaughter charges against a handful of directors and firms are, in this sense, both an important admission and a political diversion. They acknowledge that 168 people were killed because of criminally reckless decisions taken in boardrooms and site offices, not because of fate or "human error." But they leave untouched the developers, financiers and senior officials who preside over a housing order in which safety is subordinated to profit at every level. The Wang Fuk Court inferno is part of the same global pattern as the Grenfell Tower fire in London: working-class homes wrapped in flammable materials to cut costs, safety warnings ignored, regulators acting as rubber stamps, and then the resulting mass deaths presented as "tragic accidents" rather than the predictable outcome of a profit-driven housing regime. In both cases, the poorest layers of society were forced to live in death traps so that developers, contractors and financiers could save money and extract rent.

Friedrich Engels termed this "social murder": the conscious maintenance of social arrangements that place people in conditions where an early death is not just possible but inevitable. The prosecution of a few contractors in Hong Kong, like the limited scapegoating after Grenfell, leaves intact the capitalist system that treats housing as a speculative asset rather than a social right; preventing future Wang Fuk Courts and Grenfells requires the independent mobilization of the working class to expropriate the big property interests, place housing and maintenance under democratic control, and reorganize social life on a socialist basis.



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