

28 killed in shoe factory fire in China

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A fire that broke out in a shoe factory in the southeastern Chinese province of Fujian on Thursday has killed 28 people. According to Chinese state media, 237 workers and two visitors were in the building when the blaze broke out—two of the 213 rescued died in hospital, while another 26 missing people were later confirmed dead. The number of injured has not been reported.

The fire started on the ground floor of a five-storey building in the city of Jinjiang and spread quickly as a result of the highly flammable material used in shoe manufacture. Some workers jumped from the building to escape the fire. Social media footage showed people trapped on the roof as the blaze ripped through multiple floors.

A local fire department official told state media that material for shoe soles had been piled up in stairwells hindering the ability of firefighters to reach the flames. The fire department sent 35 vehicles and nearly 200 firefighters to fight the blaze, which took about four hours to extinguish. More than 500 people were involved in the search and rescue operation.

Huiteng Footwear, which operated the factory, is just one of more than 5,000 shoe manufacturers in Jinjiang. The city is often described as China's "shoe capital" as it produces about 20 percent of the world's sports shoes. More than half a million people are employed in the industry.

In a pro forma response, Chinese President Xi Jinping called for a swift investigation of the disaster and said authorities would "strictly hold those responsible accountable." The state-owned Xinhua news agency reported that the factory's owner and other company officials have been taken into custody and the company's accounts have been frozen.

In the early 2000s when he was governor of Fujian province, Xi hailed the "Jinjiang experience" as a model for China's economic development. A poor

agricultural area was transformed into a massive manufacturing hub as small and medium factories producing for foreign brands rapidly expanded their operations.

The city is home to three of China's four largest sports shoe makers: Anta Sports, Xtep and 361 Degrees, whose executives are from local business families. The 11.5 kilometre "Shoe Capital Road" runs through the north of Jinjiang, lined with factories, wholesale markets and specialised suppliers. More than a billion pairs of shoes are manufactured in the city annually.

This vast industrial expansion of shoe manufacturing in China has come at a high cost to workers. A 2015 report entitled "Tricky Footwork—The Struggle for Labour Rights in the Chinese Footwear Industry" stated that workers in factories that supply European brands told of "low wages, involuntary overtime, insufficient protection from health and safety risks, state violence to suppress strikes, unpaid social insurance contributions and insufficient severance payments."

Many are migrant workers from poorer areas of China who live packed in dormitories and labour under highly regimented conditions. Migrant workers are treated as second-class citizens who do not have access to basic social services in the cities where they are compelled to reside.

Many small and medium companies such as Huiteng Footwear are under financial pressure as the Chinese economy has slowed. Li Qiang, founder of China Labor Watch, told the *Wall Street Journal* that "workplace safety is often treated by some companies as a cost that can be cut, rather than as a basic responsibility that must be fulfilled."

The Hong Kong-based *Sing Tao Daily* reported that several shoe factory fires had occurred in Chendai Town in the past, but provided no details. Chendai Town is the core area of the Jinjiang shoe

manufacturing industry. Some of the fires involved safety hazards in so-called “three-in-one” factory buildings that combine production, warehouse and dormitory.

Commenting on the latest fire, President Xi noted that there had been “several major industrial safety accidents” in China this year, then declared: “All regions and relevant departments must draw profound lessons from these incidents.” Such token statements, like safety regulations that lack the necessary measures to enforce them, do little or nothing to halt the ongoing carnage in workplaces.

In May, an explosion in a fireworks plant in the city of Changsha in Hunan province killed at least 37 people and injured 60. Huasheng Fireworks Manufacturing had repeatedly been cited for safety risks in the past, with a fine of 15,000 yuan (\$2,205) in January 2026 for two violations. These involved mixing reducing agents and oxidisers in its workshop, significantly elevating the risk of an explosion.

Also in May, at least 82 workers were killed in a gas explosion at the Liushenyu Coal Mine in Shanxi Province. The privately owned mine had “hidden” shafts mined by outsourced and unregistered contractors. Nearly half of the workers at the time of the explosion were not logged onto the shift. The illegal shafts increased output, which was sold illegally and also avoided taxes on coal extraction. The hidden shafts were not, of course, subject to the same safety requirements as other areas of the mine.

The number of work-related accidents decreased by nearly 9 percent in 2025 from the year before, according to figures from the Ministry of Emergency Management. But the death toll is staggering: Nearly 20,000 workplace accidents occurred nationwide last year, resulting in more than 18,000 deaths.



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