At least 30 people dead in Thailand bar fire

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A large fire at a bar late Sunday night in Bangkok, Thailand has killed at least 30 people and injured 75 more. Two dozen are still in critical condition. It is one of the deadliest fires in the country since a 2009 blaze at another nightclub, though such tragedies are far from isolated incidents in Thailand where fire regulations are lax and often unenforced.

The fire took place at the Rong Beer Na Lat Phrao bar and restaurant, which included a stage for live music performances. The bar is located in the Chatuchak district of Bangkok, which is popular for restaurants and entertainment venues with both local residents and tourists. Videos posted to social media showed an intense blaze, with flames shooting out of the front of the building and people running for safety.

An investigation into the fire is underway, one which will focus on the building's fire safety systems and electrical equipment as well as the adequacy of emergency exits and compliance with local regulations. Initial reports state that the fire began at a circuit breaker or air conditioner near the venue's stage where the Thai indie band Thotsakan was performing.

Witnesses described smoke near the stage and then an explosion of some sort. Others described the ceiling being quickly engulfed in flames. It appears likely that decorations or flammable material in the ceilings contributed to the rapid spread of the blaze. Under lax fire safety regulations, the business was registered as a restaurant with live music and was not required to use fire-retardant materials.

One of musicians stated, "After the explosion I didn't see anybody trying to run, most of them were on the floor ?asking for help." The fire resulted in power being cut and customers searching for an exit in the dark. Usa Tadsree, a customer, stated, "There was a boom—a very fast boom…There was no way to get out at all." In the confusion, smoke inhalation likely caused the majority of deaths.

The high death toll is being attributed to a disregard for safety at the establishment. National Police Chief Kittiratt Phanphet told reporters, "At this time, police have established negligence as the primary theory guiding their investigation."

Witnesses described the bar prior to the accident as having a dark, "maze-like" interior with a low ceiling and without clearly marked exits, making navigating a chore under normal conditions. A nearby resident Sirinya speaking to BBC Thai said she had visited the bar once. She expressed concern that the tragedy could be repeated "because there are so many of these pubs" in the area.

Both exits to the bar were reportedly obstructed. One exit at the back near the restrooms was locked while the exit at the front was obstructed by tables and shelves used to sell merchandise. When the fire erupted near the front of the venue, people likely ran to the back to escape and either got lost in the bathroom or were unable to exit through the locked door.

The tragic incident is far from an isolated event nor are these kinds of incidents simply unforeseen disasters. The owner of the venue, who is currently in critical condition, previously lost a bar in Yasothon Province in 2019 to a fire, which fortunately injured no-one.

After Sunday's fire was extinguished, both Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul and Bangkok Governor Chadchart Sittipunt visited the scene to give the impression of government oversight and concern. Chadchart stated on Tuesday, "We've set up a committee to investigate the truth, what should be improved, and what rules should be changed," adding "we will do more random checks" supposedly to identify safety violations.

Such government promises and expressions of concern will be ditched as soon as public anger and outrage dies down. Safety in Thai workplaces is

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regularly disregarded in order to maximize profit. The Rong Beer Na Lat Phrao bar had been inspected in April, with authorities claiming that fire exits and emergency signs were in place.

Comparisons have been drawn with the 2022 fire at the Mountain B nightclub in Chonburi Province that killed 25 people. In that incident, the club had been illegally constructed in a closed space and also lacked proper fire exits. It used a flammable material for soundproofing that contributed to the spread of the blaze.

In 2009, 67 people were killed at the Santika Club in Bangkok. The club also lacked adequate exits and other safety measures, and did not even hold a license to operate. A number of causes for that fire have been suggested, including the use of pyrotechnics or an electrical fire, though flammable materials in the building's construction material contributed to the disaster.

After the 2022 Chonburi fire, the Bangkok government carried out an inspection of bars and restaurants. Numerous locations were inspected including in the Chatuchak district where Sunday's fire took place. At the time, the city government ordered at least 83 out of 400 bars to suspend their operations and supposedly emphasized the need for proper fire escapes.

The latest tragedy demonstrates that such basic measures were never taken seriously. Such government inspections are a temporary expedient to fend off criticism. Often businesses are ordered to make changes but no actual steps are taken to ensure the well-being of customers and workers.

Thailand's nightlife industry, which relies heavily on tourism, amounts to approximately $US5.5 billion dollars annually and contributes about 1 percent to GDP. In 2019, 40 million tourists visited Thailand but the number plummeted with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then figures have risen to nearly 33 million people visiting Thailand in 2025, but this was a 7 percent decrease from the previous year.

As a result, there is high competition within the industry for customers. This leads not only to safety violations to cut costs but also widespread bribery of officials to turn the other way when these violations are uncovered. Whatever the local and central governments' promises, safety will continue to be subordinated to private profit with tragic consequences.

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