

5 workers killed in helmet factory fire in Sri Lanka

Wasantha Wijesiri, Dehin Wasantha
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Five workers were killed in an inferno on July 21 at the Nimato helmet factory in the Katuwana Industrial Zone in Homagama, about 25 kilometres southeast of Colombo.

The tragedy is one of Sri Lanka's deadliest industrial disasters. It was not a random accident, but the result of a profit-driven system that forces people to work in factories where basic safety measures are ignored.

The fire broke out around 9:45 a.m. on Tuesday. Authorities later found that large quantities of PVC, polystyrene foam and other highly combustible materials had been stored inside the factory, allowing the blaze to engulf the three-storey building within minutes.

More than 80 workers were on duty, but most were on their breakfast break when the fire began. Had they all been at their workstations, the death toll would have been much higher.

Preliminary police investigations indicated that an electrical short circuit may have occurred after a fan fell into a container of paint thinner. Workers tried to put out the flames with fire extinguishers while their trapped colleagues cried out for help. But the thick smoke and intense heat rapidly overwhelmed the building, leaving those trapped on the third floor with no escape.

Mario Edward, 54, a production supervisor, was among those who took the lead in fighting the fire. He collected an extinguisher from the ground floor and rushed back upstairs, where he was killed by the fire.

The other four who died were young workers from impoverished agricultural areas who had migrated to the city to find work. Two were 19 years old and the other two were 24. According to media reports, they were Dilip Dilanka, Pahan Udara, Sachin Dilshan, and D. Damayanthi.

The bodies were burned beyond recognition. DNA testing was required to confirm identities.

Shedding crocodile tears, Deputy Labour Minister Mahinda Jayasinghe expressed his "deepest condolences"

to the victims' families and promised a "comprehensive investigation." Like countless similar inquiries, this will serve to cover up the real causes of the disaster and to shield the company management.

Even a token fine against the company is unlikely. The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-led National People's Power (JVP/NPP) government is determined not to undermine investors' "confidence" by holding the factory owners accountable.

It is already clear that the helmet factory, like many others in Sri Lanka's Free Trade Zones and industrial estates, was a death trap. Since around 2010 the factory had operated in a three-storey building that packed a large workforce into a cramped area. The ground floor housed heavy machinery, the second contained the painting section, and the third was used for helmet assembly with polystyrene foam and other combustible materials.

Fuelled by burning chemicals and flammable materials, the blaze rapidly engulfed the building. Air entering through the main entrance intensified the fire. The building's steel framework collapsed, blocking the emergency exits, and the external emergency staircase became detached from the structure, trapping workers on the third floor.

Media reports note that the Central Environmental Authority (CEA) found the Nimato factory failed to renew its Environmental Protection Licence after 2024. It had not submitted mandatory noise and air quality assessments or a waste management report. The factory stored and used large quantities of PVC and chemicals that release toxic compounds when burned.

Even more damning, the CEA confirmed that the factory had no emergency response plan to deal with a fire or any other industrial disaster. Officials had repeatedly instructed management to rectify these violations, most recently on July 2, but no action was taken. CEA officials did not halt production until the

factory was made safe and did not warn the workers about the dangers they faced.

The tragedy has exposed another glaring example of official neglect. Despite around 2,000 workers being employed in the Katuwana Industrial Zone and thousands more in the 34 companies operating in the nearby Templeburg Industrial Estate, there is no fire station either within the industrial zone or in Homagama itself, which is home to more than 237,000 people.

The nearest fire brigade is operated by the Kotte Municipal Council, about 15 kilometres away. It took fire engines nearly an hour to reach the scene, by which time the fire had engulfed the factory, leaving trapped workers with little chance of survival.

Sri Lanka's factory inspection system is dangerously understaffed. The *Sunday Times* reported in January 2019 that the Industrial Safety Division, responsible for enforcing the Factories Ordinance, employs only 25 qualified factory inspecting engineers. Labour officials estimate that roughly 100 engineers would be needed to oversee nearly 30,000 factories across Sri Lanka.

The *Sunday Times* also reported that Colombo's Fire Service has only 10 staff dedicated to fire-safety inspections and is mandated to inspect only around 20 percent of buildings in the capital.

The Homagama tragedy is the latest in a series of industrial fatalities. In November 2025, two workers died in separate workplace accidents within a single week: Rajinikantha was killed when a decades-old machine exploded at a rubber-processing plant, and Krishnan Vijayakumar was dragged into a tea-rolling machine that lacked mandatory safety guards.

In August 2025, two workers were killed at the Colombo Port International Container Terminal and at a factory in Makola. There have been no reports that the victims' families received adequate compensation or that company owners were held accountable.

According to the International Labour Organization, Sri Lanka records about 60 to 80 fatal workplace accidents each year, along with around 2,000 non-fatal accidents—figures that almost certainly understate the true scale of industrial death and injury.

The same pattern is repeated internationally.

- On July 12, 2026, a fire at a bar in Bangkok killed 30 people and injured dozens.

- In March 2026, 14 workers were incinerated at an auto parts plant in Daejeon, South Korea, where fires had broken out repeatedly and workers were disciplined for calling emergency services.

- In October 2025, 16 workers died in an explosion at a munitions plant in Tennessee, USA, and 16 people burned to death at a garment factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

All these tragedies are linked to lax safety regulations and lack of enforcement by government officials.

Sri Lanka's JVP/NPP government is preparing a major overhaul of labour laws, which will further restrict workers' ability to oppose exploitative and dangerous working conditions. Its proposed "reforms" include a requirement for unions to have at least 100 members to gain legal recognition, and mandatory secret ballots before any industrial action. It is emulating the Indian government, which has replaced 29 laws with four labour codes that attack job security and the right to strike.

The Katuwana inferno was not an "accident" but an industrial mass murder—the product of a capitalist system that subordinates human life to the relentless drive for profit. Safety measures are neglected and left unenforced because every rupee spent protecting workers is a rupee subtracted from the bottom line. No regulatory tweak and no appeal to the conscience of the capitalist class will stop the killing.

The trade unions, acting as agencies of the companies and the state, have suppressed opposition among workers to the evisceration of workplace safety.

To defend their safety and their lives, workers urgently need new organisations that they control: rank-and-file action committees, independent of the pro-company union bureaucracies, should be established in every workplace. These committees must halt production when factories are unsafe, while fighting to defend jobs and wages. They must mobilise workers to demand the full disclosure of all safety data and bring to justice those responsible for deaths and injuries.

Workers in Sri Lanka must link their struggles with workers in India and other countries, through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, which is fighting to mobilise workers internationally in the struggle against capitalism and for international socialism.



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