Indonesian factory fire kills at least 26 workers amid serious safety failures

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At least 26 workers were killed in a fire that engulfed a confectionery factory in Cikande, in Indonesia's Banten province, last Saturday. The families of many of the workers are still waiting for the identification of their loved ones, almost a week after the disaster.

The deaths at PT Fonusa Agung Mulia, which manufactures Milkita sweets for export to more than 40 countries, were preventable. A worker has revealed that the factory's fire alarm had failed during another dangerous incident just two months earlier, of which management was aware.

Approximately 300 employees were working at the confectionery factory complex on Saturday, many of whom escaped. Of the 63 workers initially listed by rescue authorities as directly affected by the fire, 29 were confirmed to have survived, five of whom were hospitalised.

Aman, who worked on the upper floor producing lollipops, told Detik that the machinery stopped and he could detect a smell but could not see smoke. He only became aware of the fire when his shift supervisor, Rusman Fauzan, rushed over and told workers to evacuate.

Aman escaped by jumping from a height of approximately seven metres, grabbing hold of metal fixtures as he descended. Fauzan was reported missing after returning to the burning building to assist other workers.

Security guard Suyanto told *Tirto* that attempts to extinguish the blaze using fire hydrants had failed. The electricity had gone out and the emergency alarm had not sounded.

Jajuli, a member of the rescue team, told *JawaPos* that the automatic fire alarm was undergoing repairs. The building had only one emergency staircase, near which many of the victims were found crowded together.

Preliminary forensic examinations established on Tuesday that the remains recovered from the factory belonged to 26 victims. That evening, investigators announced the identification of the first victim, Muhammad Ma'rupin, aged 31.

In a damning interview with *BantenNews*, an anonymous employee revealed that in the earlier incident, thick smoke and a pungent smell had emanated from the production area, reportedly in connection with an electrical fault involving air-conditioning equipment. A similar fault is suspected of having triggered Saturday's fire.

On that occasion, too, the fire alarm failed to sound. A manager attended the scene and workers became aware of the danger only through verbal warnings.

Rather than being instructed to evacuate in such circumstances, workers had been told to salvage production materials.

"They don't even put people first," the worker said.

The employee described the difficulties workers encountered simply entering and leaving the building during ordinary shift changes, owing to the inadequacy of access routes.

Despite the earlier incident, production continued.

At a press conference on Sunday, company CEO Steven Erwin Wijaya claimed that the factory's evacuation routes and firefighting equipment met regulatory standards and that the company regularly conducted exercises with the fire brigade.

Those claims have been contradicted by workers and fire department officials. Yusuf Riesata, an official with the Serang Regency fire department, stated that it had received no request from the company to conduct a fire drill since he assumed his position in January.

The worker interviewed by *BantenNews* said that in two years at the factory he had never participated in a fire drill or received training in the use of fire extinguishers.

"What are they for, then? It's just a formality," he said.

The company had spent considerable sums on construction work but had not prioritised improving emergency access, the worker said. "This isn't efficiency; it's stinginess."

Wijaya also revealed that employees were required to leave their mobile phones in lockers while working. With the destruction of the lockers, the company was initially unable to contact dozens of its employees.

Police have launched a criminal investigation into

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suspected negligence, questioned 19 witnesses and seized documents relating to the factory's construction, permits and safety procedures, as well as CCTV equipment.

Visiting the factory on Monday, Labour Minister Yassierli acknowledged that the industrial operation posed a fire risk.

Why, then, had the factory been allowed to operate under the conditions described by the workers?

Banten provincial labour department head Septo Kalnadi was unable even to confirm on Sunday whether the company had been routinely submitting occupational safety reports.

The visits by government officials, pledges of investigations and announcements of compensation payments are aimed at containing anger over the deaths.

Playing a prominent role is Said Iqbal, presidential adviser on labour affairs and longstanding leader of the Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions and the Labour Party.

On Thursday, Iqbal announced that the families of the deceased would receive compensation of at least 253 million rupiah ($US14,000) through the state employment insurance agency, BPJS Ketenagakerjaan, with additional educational benefits for children.

The wage-based component of the compensation amounts to just four years' pay. Such is the paltry sum provided to families for the loss of a loved one who may have been their sole breadwinner.

Far from mobilising workers against the conditions exposed by the fire, Iqbal is intervening as a representative of the very government that has presided over the gutting of workplace safety regulation.

The Cikande disaster comes less than a year after a fire at the Jakarta offices of Terra Drone Indonesia killed 22 people. The seven-storey building had just one entrance and exit. Management had allegedly failed to provide safety training or appoint occupational safety personnel.

In the wake of that disaster, Home Affairs Minister Tito Karnavian pledged to bring together regional authorities from across the country to strengthen fire safety oversight.

Just two days after the Cikande fire, floodwaters inundated an unauthorised gold mine in Bogor, West Java. At least 13 miners were killed, with others still missing as of Thursday.

Successive Indonesian governments have sought to attract international investment on the basis of cheap labour, gutting even the limited protections afforded to workers under existing legislation.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the number of labour inspectors in Indonesia fell from 1,927 in 2016 to 1,467 in 2023. In August this year, the Labour Ministry revealed that the number had declined further to just 1,366, or one inspector for every 3,800 companies.

The gutting of the inspectorate has proceeded despite repeated warnings by international agencies over inadequate resources and the insufficient frequency and coverage of workplace inspections.

The Labour Ministry reported more than 319,000 workplace accident insurance claims in 2025, including 9,834 fatal cases—an average of 27 deaths every day. With tens of millions of Indonesian workers outside the employment insurance system altogether, even these figures substantially understate the toll.

A World Health Organization (WHO) report published in 2025 showed that Indonesia had the second-highest estimated death rate from occupational injuries among the 11 countries in its South-East Asian region. For every 100,000 people of working age in Indonesia, an estimated 11 died annually from occupational injuries and a further 43 from work-related diseases.

Milkita is a brand of United Family Food (Unifam), which employs approximately 5,000 workers. Its products are sold internationally, including in the United States, China and Australia.

The fortunes of the Indonesian capitalist class have been built up on the basis of the exploitation of workers such as those at Cikande. According to the World Inequality Report 2026, the richest 10 percent of the Indonesian population monopolise 59.4 percent of the country's wealth, while the poorest 50 percent own just 2.5 percent.

Worldwide, the ILO estimates that almost 3 million workers die annually from work-related injuries and diseases, with nearly 400 million suffering non-fatal occupational injuries. Almost two-thirds of work-related deaths occur in the Asia-Pacific region.

The industrial slaughter of workers is by no means confined to the poorer countries. In the United States, more than 5,000 workers were killed on the job in 2024, equivalent to one every 104 minutes.

As with so many industrial disasters internationally, the Cikande fire underscores the need for an independent investigation by workers themselves, rather than leaving the determination of responsibility in the hands of the employers and government authorities.

The appalling toll of workplace deaths in country after country underscores the need for a global movement of the working class to put workers' lives and safety before corporate profit, which the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is fighting to build.

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