

No fire alarms, blocked exits

Christmas night fire kills 311 in central China

By James Conachy
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A Christmas night inferno in a four-storey building has claimed at least 311 lives in Luoyang, the capital of the central Chinese province of Henan. More than 50 other victims are being treated in hospital for burns and smoke inhalation.

Located in Luoyang's commercial centre, the Dongdu Building contained a major supermarket complex, as well as dozens of smaller specialty retailers and offices. The top floor housed an unlicensed but popular nightclub, which was hosting a special Christmas disco on the night. The majority of those killed were teenagers celebrating at the disco and building workers refurbishing the supermarket. They were trapped inside the building without means of escape.

According to reports by the local Chinese media, the fire broke out at 9.35pm in one of the basement levels. Government authorities have alleged the fire was started by "carelessness" on the part of workers renovating the basement floors. Four welders have confessed to sparking the fire according to Xinhua, the official Chinese news agency.

Whatever the immediate cause of the fire, the reason for the high number of fatalities was the lack of safety standards in the building. Without any sprinkler system, the fire rapidly spread to the first and second floors. The building had no fire alarms or smoke detectors, delaying the arrival of emergency services and leaving people on the upper floors unaware of the fire for some time.

Upon arriving on the scene, fire trucks were hindered from deploying around the building by stalls on the streets and sidewalks. The intensity of the blaze prevented firefighters entering the lower floors while the ladders on some fire trucks could not reach the upper windows.

According to the few survivors, panic set in as smoke

filled the upper floors. One survivor told Chinese television: "When the fire broke out, the whole disco was in chaos. I survived because my husband pushed me out onto a balcony". She then jumped four stories onto air cushions.

This escape route was not available to most. The majority of the windows were too small for people to pass through. The emergency exit to the roof from the disco was locked. Of two other exits, one was filled with smoke while the other was concealed behind a bar. The elevators did not work due to a power failure. On the third and second floors, potential escape routes through corridors and exits were blocked by construction material and merchandise.

By the time the blaze was extinguished at around 12.45am, most people in the building had died from smoke inhalation. Of those at the disco, it is thought that no more than a dozen survived. Wang Wei-hong, who survived by staying close to a broken window for fresh air, told the media: "Fireman brought me and my friend out of the building after 1.00am wearing oxygen masks. When we got outside, it was like stepping into a field of dead bodies".

A local newspaper has alleged that the death toll must be far higher as ticket sales would indicate that some 500 people were at the disco—not 200 as officially claimed.

The fire is the latest in the chain of tragedies arising from China's frenzied development of free market capitalism over the past 20 years. With close ties to the political establishment, entrepreneurs—both foreign and local—have enjoyed a business climate best summed up as "anything goes" in relation to wages, working conditions, construction standards, pollution controls and basic health and safety. Every year thousands of Chinese are killed or maimed at work or by unsafe

buildings and infrastructure.

Due to industrialisation and the influx of rural immigrants seeking employment, Chinese cities like Luoyang have more than doubled in size, yet urban planning has been haphazard at best. Earlier this month, in the southern city of Dongguan, a building collapsed as its owners were adding two floors to it, without authorisation or approval by qualified architects. As is often the case, the building's owners were also the local government officials.

Enforcement of fire safety codes has been equally lax. The Dongdu Building in Luoyang had failed fire safety inspections repeatedly over the past three years with the most recent inspection reported to have been only last week. In 1997 it was ranked among the 40 most dangerous buildings in Henan province.

A Luoyang government official told Reuters that the building management had been asked to make improvements. Nevertheless, authorities did nothing to prevent the leasing of space to the disco and other unlicensed operators.

The Chinese government appears distinctly alarmed at public anger over the fire and is seeking to placate it. Orders have been issued for snap inspections and the shutdown of unsafe buildings and entertainment venues.

Police have already detained up to 12 people in connection with the fire. According to Xinhua, the building manager is among them, while the supermarket operator is being looked for. It is highly likely, however, that those arrested will simply be made scapegoats while little or nothing is done to improve safety standards.

There have been a series of devastating fires in China. In November 1994, 234 people died in a fire at a nightclub in Fuxin, Liaoning province—the emergency exits had been locked. One month later, 323 people attending a concert hall were killed when it caught fire in Karamay, Xinjiang province.

At the time the government promised that action would be taken to compel building developers and function operators to adhere to fire safety codes. Six years on, the Luoyang fire has exposed the fact that a shopping complex in the centre of a provincial capital was operating without fire alarms, proper fire escapes or adequate firefighting equipment.

Fires take a heavy toll in factories and workplaces,

particularly in the industrialised southern provinces that are the focus of foreign direct investment. In many cases, factory owners lock fire exits to stop theft or block them with stored product. In one of the most recent blazes, eight young women were killed in their factory in the Xiamen free trade zone in June.

By the Chinese government's own statistics, there were over 300,000 fires between 1993 and 1998, which killed 12,638 people and injured 22,382 more. Most occurred in privately owned buildings. In the first three months of this year alone, there were 36,832 fires or explosions, which claimed 971 lives.

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