

Egypt: Building collapse claims dozens of lives

By Simon Wheelan
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Two buildings collapsed within 24 hours of each other in Egypt last week, killing a total of 27 people. A five-storey residential and commercial building collapsed in the industrial city of Damietta. The tragedy was made worse because all but one of the 22 killed were brides, relatives and friends preparing for their weddings in the beauty salon on the ground floor. Damietta specialist hospital reported a further 25 people with serious injuries.

Only a few hours later, but much less publicised, a further five people died when wooden supports gave way on a three-storey building in the Nile Delta town of Tanta. The respective local authorities had previously condemned both buildings, but no further action had been taken.

These criminal and unnecessary deaths came barely a week after a fire onboard an Egyptian train killed 300 passengers travelling in lower class carriages. After that tragedy, government ministers declared themselves happy with transport infrastructure and the rescue attempts.

No minister has even commented on the latest needless loss of life, or even bothered to address the regular occurrence of collapsing buildings in Egypt.

Such tragedies are commonplace due to the shoddy construction of homes and workplaces, especially in working class areas. Last year five people died when a building collapsed in Ashmun. In 2000, 15 people died in Alexandria when a six-storey clothing factory went up in flames, killing a workforce that included children. In 1999, a five-storey apartment block collapsed, killing an unknown number of residents. In 1998, a young boy was killed and 20 injured when a balcony collapsed during wedding celebrations in a village northeast of Cairo.

All these incidents occurred after the government had introduced supposedly more strict rules and regulations for the construction industry in October 1996. It had

been forced to do so due to popular anger following the collapse of an 11-storey apartment block that killed 64 inhabitants. On that occasion the addition of unauthorised floors caused the collapse.

The residents of the living quarters above the beauty salon in Damietta had evacuated the building only days before its collapse, fearing for their safety. Days earlier deep cracks appeared in the façade of the ageing city centre building. Residents reported ominous groans emitted by the foundations. The salon had continued business regardless and on the day it caved in was teeming with brides and attendants. Local authorities had ordered the unsafe building to be razed to the ground two years ago, but this order was never followed through. As a result hundreds of people in Damietta preparing to celebrate weddings attended funerals instead.

The local authorities in Tanta too had ordered the offending building to be repaired in 1994 and then in 2000 declared it unsafe and called for it to be demolished.

While pinned under the rubble of the Damietta beauty salon, medical student Rashia Mohammed Sarhan had called the emergency services by cellphone and was told to call back from a landline. When she said she was unable to do so, she was put on hold. After several minutes, Sarhan gave up and called her relatives instead.

Angry Damietta residents told Associated Press that ambulances and emergency services took more than an hour to arrive at the scene. In their desperation, residents attempted to dig out possible survivors with the aid of a bulldozer. Unfortunately this action only diminished the chances of anyone surviving under the rubble. Emad Said Ris asked, "Where are our emergency experts? The bulldozers brought in were just killing the people underneath."

Damietta council official Sameer Abu Hussein

admitted, "Rescue efforts were primitive, the whole operation was primitive. There was no expertise, and this caused the high number of casualties."

Inconsolable relatives who had rushed to the scene upon hearing of the collapse beat the doors of the ambulances as they took their relations to the morgue. Riot police surrounded the scene of devastation, allowing only rescue workers and residents in to remove rubble. Rescue workers working through the night pulled a nine-year-old boy alive from the wreckage five hours after the collapse.

The governor of Damietta denied any responsibility or delays in the rescue operation, claiming, "The rescue effectiveness could not have been any better. I followed it myself."

In Egypt 50 percent of the population are now urban dwellers, living in the densely populated cities. Coastal cities like Damietta are especially overcrowded. Between 1976 and 1986, the last city census period, the national urban population grew by 10 percent and the numbers of towns with populations in excess of 100,000 rose from 20 to 24.

Over the last three decades, however, the populations of Cairo and Alexandria have stabilised but the towns and smaller cities like Damietta have experienced a demographic explosion. This unprecedented movement from rural areas to the cities has been met by a proliferation of unauthorised housing. In Cairo alone illegal housing shelters 1,600,000 inhabitants, equal to 20 percent of the capital's population. The crises produced by shoddy illegal housing are accentuated by a lack of effective regulation of the construction industry and almost zero investment by the central government in social housing provision.

One of the reasons that the populations of the two main cities have stabilised is the growth of cities like Damietta. The city's port was recently upgraded in order to take some of the strain off Alexandria. The opportunities to work at port facilities and shipbuilders and in other industrial and commercial sectors like furniture, leather, textile and foodstuffs acts as a magnet to surrounding impoverished rural populations.

No provision is made by the central government to build housing for those who flock to the city, so unscrupulous contractors build housing units with cheap combustible materials and add extra floors that cannot be supported. All the while poorly paid public

officials turn a blind eye, accept bribes and fail to enforce feeble existing regulations. Even when a building is finally condemned, there is no guarantee it will be demolished. Instead, like in Damietta and Tanta, they collapse round the heads of those who cannot afford to live anywhere safer.

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