

At least 74 dead in Johannesburg, South Africa apartment blaze

Kevin Reed
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At least 74 people were killed, including 12 children, in a horrifying fire that destroyed a run-down five-storey apartment building in Johannesburg, South Africa, early Thursday morning.

The deadly blaze, the cause of which is currently under investigation, apparently began on the first floor and spread rapidly to the upper levels of the building, which was occupied by immigrant and homeless families in the city of more than 5.6 million people.

Reuters reported that the building “was gutted, blackened by soot and still smoldering on Thursday as emergency services gathered around it and bodies lay covered in blankets on a nearby street.”

Witnesses reported that people living in the building jumped out of windows and babies were being tossed from the third floor to others waiting below in the desperate effort to escape the inferno.

At a news conference, city officials and medical staff reported that, of the children who died, the youngest was a one year old. An undetermined number of people were still missing, and many bodies recovered were burned beyond recognition, they said.

Emergency services officials warned that the death toll could rise as they continued to search what was left of the building. Over 50 people were injured in the blaze, six of whom were in serious condition and taken to a local hospital.

The Associated Press (AP) reported on Thursday, “Firefighters were making their way through the remnants of shacks and other informal structures that littered the inside of the derelict five-storey building in the heart of Johannesburg’s central business district hours after the fire was extinguished.”

The AP report continued, “Smoke seeped out of the blackened building even though the fire was out, while twisted blankets and sheets hung like ropes out of

shattered windows to show how people had used them to try and escape the flames.”

Although authorities have yet to determine the cause, Mgcini Tshwaku, a local government official, told news media that initial evidence suggested it started with a candle. Inhabitants of the building frequently used candles for light and lit fires to keep warm in the winter cold, he said.

Eyewitnesses who watched the catastrophe unfold from across the street said they saw people throw babies out of the burning building and at least one of the deaths occurred when a man, who leapt from the third floor, landed head first on the sidewalk.

Survivors described occupants, who got trapped behind locked gates, at exits while there were no functioning fire escape routes. A witness who lived in the building next door told the television news channel eNCA he heard people screaming for help and shouting, “We’re dying in here.”

No one knows how many were living in the building. Some estimates are that 200 people were residing there, while one government official said that 141 families were affected by the fire. Since many of the occupants were immigrants, identifying the victims and establishing who is still missing will be difficult.

Government officials initially claimed the building was occupied by squatters, but this was contradicted by Lebogang Isaac Maile, head of the Human Settlements department for Gauteng province, which includes Johannesburg, who said some of those who died were likely renting from or being extorted by criminal gangs.

“There are cartels who prey on who are vulnerable people. Because some of these buildings, if not most of them, are actually in the hands of those cartels who collect rental from the people,” Maile told Reuters.

The mayor of Johannesburg, Kabelo Gwamanda, told

reporters the city had leased the building to a charity for displaced women but that it had “ended up serving a different purpose.” He did not give any further explanation of his comment.

Johannesburg is the richest city in Africa, but it is wracked with poverty, hunger and homelessness, particularly in its center. As the AP report states, “Abandoned and broken-down buildings are common, and people desperate for some form of accommodation use them for shelter. City authorities refer to the structures as ‘hijacked buildings’ and they have been a problem for years, if not decades.”

Seeking to deflect responsibility for the disaster, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa called it a “wake up call” regarding the city’s housing crisis. The former trade union official and businessman, who is now one of the richest individuals on the African continent with a net worth of \$500 million, also claimed the deadly fire was the product of apartment buildings being “taken over by criminals, who then levy rent on vulnerable people and families who need and want accommodation in the inner city.”

Ramaphosa’s comments are a cynical attempt to cover up what the fire reveals. Whatever the exact circumstances, the tragedy is clearly related to the massive social crisis in Johannesburg and in South Africa as a whole.

Those conditions are an indictment of the whole perspective personified by Ramaphosa and the African National Congress (ANC). The ending of racial apartheid in 1994 was the product of major social struggles by the masses.

But the ANC ensured that the outcome was the establishment of a new republic based on capitalism and an even more direct relationship with global finance capital.

According to the World Bank Gini Index, South Africa has a wealth inequality value of 63 percent, which means the top 1 percent of earners take home almost 20 percent of all income and the top 10 percent take home 65 percent of income. On the other hand, 90 percent of South African earners take home only 35 percent of all income.

This social evolution demonstrates that the ANC’s nationalist and pro-capitalist program has resolved none of the social issues confronting the masses. Instead, it has enriched a tiny national bourgeoisie,

while further impoverishing the masses, demonstrating that the fundamental social division is class, not race.

Tragedies such as the Johannesburg fire are not limited to the historically oppressed and underdeveloped countries. They are increasingly a world phenomenon, bound up with the global growth of inequality.

That was underscored by the Grenfell Tower inferno in North Kensington, West London, on June 14, 2017, which killed 72 people. In that catastrophe, which started on the fourth floor of the 24-storey apartment building, the deaths also included children and entire families, many of whom were immigrants. Many of the deaths were also because people were trapped in their flats with no way to escape the flames.

The Grenfell tragedy was also the direct result of government deregulation carried out by both Labour and Conservative-led governments over decades that put capitalist profiteering above the safety and lives of residents of the tower.

The deadly Johannesburg fire also recalls the Ghost Ship blaze in Oakland, California, on December 2, 2016. The fire at the former warehouse, which had been converted into an artist collective that included living spaces, killed 36 people and was the deadliest in the city’s history.

The Ghost Ship fire was the product of a confluence of conditions all rooted in the capitalist system, which also appear to be factors in the Johannesburg disaster: soaring housing costs forcing people to seek low rents in substandard housing; property owners renting out old and poorly maintained buildings to maximize their income; and city officials leaving fire inspection understaffed and underfunded.



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