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LADB Staff

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Fire Kills Hundreds in Paraguay

by LADB Staff
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A fire in a supermarket in Asuncion, Paraguay killed nearly four hundred Sunday shoppers and injured hundreds more on August 1. The blaze was the worst disaster to hit the country in decades.

Survivors and firefighters said they found the exits blocked and officials reported that security guards received radio orders after the fire ignited to lock the doors in order to prevent looting. Police also said that the store's emergency exit was welded shut.

Authorities arrested the store's owner, his son, and security guards, saying they would be prosecuted for intentional murder. Under-funded and under-equipped volunteer fire brigades reportedly had difficulty fighting the blaze, possibly compounding the death toll.

At least 399 dead in Ycua Bolanos tragedy

Judicial sources estimate that between 700 and 800 people were in the Ycua Bolanos supermarket shopping and having lunch when the fire broke out, after two loud explosions. The first blast may have been the result of a gas leak in the food court or bakery section. The second, after the flames spread, occurred when a car blew up in the underground parking lot.

The supermarket, which is located in the lower-middle-class neighborhood of Trinidad, four km north of the city's historic center, quickly turned into an inferno. The store was one of five locations in the Ycua Bolanos chain. The official death total reached as high as 464 at one point, though officials later said 399 were confirmed dead and 144 were missing.

Oscar Latorre, general prosecutor, said that names had been counted twice or even three times during the confusion following the fire, leading to the high figure. Of the 399 dead, Latorre said 52 bodies were unidentifiable as of August 7. Dozens of bodies disappeared into ash, consumed by the flames. Rodrigo Dure, spokesman for the prosecutor's office, said "the disaster affected 200 children and adolescents, according to the testimony of relatives. Of that number, 80 died, 70 are hospitalized, 24 were discharged and 26 are missing."

Officials said the fire was the deadliest incident in Paraguay since a failed military insurrection in 1947 left some 8,000 people dead. The heat of the blaze caused one floor to collapse, crushing dozens of cars in the parking lot as flames engulfed motorists inside, police said. Badly burned bodies, some with twisted limbs, were whisked away as black billows of smoke rose overhead. Rescuers led away dozens of children found near the store's toy department.

President Nicanor Duarte declared three days of national mourning. Classes were canceled in Asuncion and people jammed hospitals and clinics to donate blood. District police commander Aristides Cabral said an explosion reportedly was heard before fire swept through the building.
"There was an explosion inside and the heat forced the bottom floor supporting the basement to give way, crushing dozens of people," he said.

**Code violations, underfunded firefighters impede rescue**

The blaze might have been avoided or swiftly controlled if municipal statute 25,097 which regulates fire prevention had been followed, said city councilor Luis Alberto Boh, chairman of the Asuncion city council's Physical and Town Planning Commission. Boh, an architect and city planner, said the 214-clause 1988 statute "is lengthy, detailed, meticulous and so strict it is even difficult to live up to."

The city councilor, a member of the center-right independent Movimiento Asuncion party, blames the accident on the city government. For buildings like the multilevel supermarket, the statute requires the prior approval of blueprints, a complete inspection of the building when work has been completed, periodic inspections of the installations, and employee training on how to handle emergencies.

"It would not be strange if in this case the inspections had not taken place," because it is common for municipal inspectors to carry out only cursory inspections or even skip them completely if they receive bribes, said Boh. Boh blames corruption for the lack of safety guarantees in the construction of buildings where large numbers of people go.

Paraguay has been ranked the fourth-most corrupt nation out of 133 countries surveyed by Transparency International (see NotiSur, 2003-10-17). The lack of enforcement of anti-fire safety measures and the decision to lock the doors as the flames were spreading were compounded by the lack of funding for firefighting. It took more than an hour to get the only source of water available working. T

he only professional firefighters in Paraguay, who belong to the National Police force, work in the Silvio Pettirossi international airport, said Rafael Valdez Peralta, the president of Paraguay's volunteer firefighters corps. "The capacity of the National Police firefighters to put out fires shrank due to budget problems, and their work gradually fell to us," he said. Valdez Peralta confirmed that the doors were locked and said the first firefighter to reach the main entryway was threatened by an armed security guard, who ordered him not to break the door's glass panel. International assistance, sympathy go to Paraguay International assistance and expressions of solidarity poured into Paraguay after the blaze.

Donations and humanitarian aid came in from Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay, among other countries, while professional soccer teams announced they would be creating funds to assist victims. Officials from the Comite de Emergencia Nacional (CEN) said US$50,000 was collected in the seven days after the fire for the families of the dead and injured, but that it was a small amount compared to the need. Allegations that the CEN was mismanaging donated funds quickly emerged.

Doctor Hugo Gomez of the state hospital said about 200 of the wounded urgently needed skin and cornea transplants. Gomez, coordinator of treatment for the disaster victims, said, "The number of
those who have injured corneas is more than 100, but only 14 need surgery for one eye, meaning that they will definitely not lose their vision." "The skin transplants have already begun," said Gomez.

On Aug. 7 "we received donations of cadaver skin and the four of the wounded were the beneficiaries." Cuban doctor Manuel Alzugaray said that in Paraguay there is no skin bank, "therefore no time can be wasted in using cadaver skin because there is no place to store it at a temperature lower than 40 degrees; by contrast, it is possible to use sterile porcine skin because it does not need the continuous cold." "I see the desperation of the burn victims and their relatives, but the grafts will be complicated by the lack of high technology apparatus," said Alzugaray, who was working voluntarily on the Paraguayan tragedy.

Owner, guards face prosecution

The supermarket owners, Juan Pio Paiva and his son Victor Daniel Paiva, were arrested on charges of intentional homicide and failure to give aid on the order of prosecutor Teresa Sosa. They allegedly gave instructions to lock the doors to keep customers from fleeing without paying after an anti-theft alarm went off. Four security guards also went into state custody for homicide and a store manager was indicted for failure to give aid.

Prosecutor Edgar Sanchez, who is leading the investigation, said a security guard told authorities that at the outset of the fire he received orders over a radio to lock the doors to prevent theft. Sanchez said the guard "didn't know" who gave the order. But main shareholder Juan Pio Paiva said no orders were given to lock the doors. "The company has insurance against vandalism," he told a news conference. "It does not make sense in a fire of this magnitude for security guards to close the doors and stay inside."

A Paraguayan judge ordered the bank accounts of the store and the jailed owners to be frozen. The newspaper Diario Noticias reported that the market was insured for only 40 million guaranis, or approximately US$6,700.

FBI, ATF investigate

On Aug. 11, prosecutors investigating the fire said the probable cause was a build-up of grease and charcoal remains that had ignited in a chimney over the grill in a restaurant at the shopping center. "There is no evidence or sign of sabotage; the investigation is pointing to a gas leak and the rapid combustion of merchandise," said Interior Minister Orlando Fiorotto. Agents from the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the International Response Team from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) arrived in Asuncion to investigate the cause of the blaze, while Argentina and Colombia also sent fire and forensics experts.

The fire evokes images of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire of 1911 in New York City, where 146 young women died when a fire broke out on the top floors of a sweatshop. Exits that had been locked to prevent employee theft and unusable fire escapes forced the women to perish in the blaze or jump to their deaths several stories below. The incident led to a strengthening of urban fire regulation in the United States, provided a foundation upon which the labor groups like the
International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) could organize, and led to reforms within the New York Fire Department, since their equipment had proven useless in fighting the fire and rescue efforts that day.

Outrage over the Ycua Bolanos fire may similarly prompt reforms to better fund firefighting and enforce fire regulations. President fires head of emergency committee President Nicanor Duarte fired Manuel Sarquis, director of the National Emergency Committee, the CEN, after summoning Sarquis to explain how aid donations were spent. The committee's new director, Aristides Gonzalez, said his task was to improve its transparency and credibility. Sarquis' dismissal came after government auditor Francisco Galiano denounced the CEN for having "a complete lack of procedures, regulations and even the most elementary systems of control over donations coming in and going out."

After his comments, President Duarte summoned the committee members to assess their efforts, making clear that he would not tolerate the illegal use of the funds.

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