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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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08.07.2019

Indonesian factory fire claims lives of 30 women and children

As many as 30 people were killed by fire on June 21 as a makeshift factory in the Indonesian province of North Sumatra burned to the ground. The building was a private home doubling as a cigarette lighter factory which employed only female workers. Among the dead were 25 women, as well as five children who had come to visit their mothers at lunchtime.

The workers all lived near the factory in Sambirejo Village on the poor outskirts of Binjai, a town about 70km west of the provincial capital Medan. Their work involved affixing metal heads onto the plastic bodies of thousands of gas lighters. On the day of the fire, police investigators report, one of the factory employees was testing a spark wheel that happened to be faulty. Sparks flew and ignited a gas cannister and other flammable materials lying about the room.

Local residents who were walking to the mosque for their Friday prayers heard a series of loud explosions from the vicinity of the factory. The building, made mostly of wood, was consumed in fire within minutes. The flames raged for around an hour before finally being extinguished by Binjai firefighters.

The workers and children inside were unable to escape as the front door had been locked and the back doors were already engulfed in flames. The windows were fitted with iron bars. The bodies were discovered lying together in a heap on the floor in the middle of the factory's single room.

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The Langkat Disaster Mitigation Agency (BPBD Langkat) quickly had the bodies removed and transported to a police hospital in Medan. Relatives of the victims were asked to provide DNA samples and help identify the workers' remains, which in many cases were burnt beyond recognition.

Families of the dead workers became frustrated with the slow identification process. Some claimed that the process would have been much easier at the place of the fire, but was difficult now that the authorities had moved and separated the bodies. Some relatives had to wait for almost a week before they could bury their loved ones.

Indra Lesmana, 34, lost his wife, two sons, and sister-in-law in the blaze. He told Al Jazeera reporters that the factory had been equipped with just one small fire extinguisher, but the employees had never been trained to use it. Factory supervisors would visit from Medan to monitor safety and inspect the worksite for dangers, but only once a month. Many locals suspected it was an illegal factory.

An elderly woman named Ros came forward as the owner of the house and told investigators that she had been renting the property for four years to a Medan businessman. This man, Indramawan, was detained by police in Medan the following day, along with two of the factory's supervisors. They are currently being investigated for "negligence" and face a penalty of up to five years in prison if found guilty.

Indramawan reportedly heads PT Kiat Unggul, a manufacturing business which owns three village residences in Langkat Regency operating as gas lighter factories, including the one in Sambirejo. He admitted to Binjai Regional Police that he did not have industrial or trade permits for the factory, nor were his female employees registered with BPJS Employment, the national health insurance system.

Many illegal Indonesian businesses manage to avoid government taxes and circumvent workplace regulations by not having the required permits. They often operate out of private homes in poor residential areas where they can find cheap labour to boost production for a lower cost.

Binjai police investigators questioned four survivors as to why the factory's front door was locked. The young women—the only survivors—were alive because they had gone out the back door for their lunch break shortly before the explosion.

The workers explained that the door was locked for several reasons. Indramawan wanted it locked to ensure that children could not enter the workplace, as many of the women

wanted to take care of their young children while working. He was also trying to hide the nature of his illegal operations by keeping the front entrance closed during the day. Lastly, he wanted to prevent any theft by workers.

Indramawan had been the business's director for five years, but claimed to police that he was only continuing the work system previously implemented by others. One of the supervisors who was apprehended by police, Lismawarni, said she had not been aware that the factory did not have the appropriate permission from regional authorities.

Accidents at informal workplaces are widespread throughout Indonesia. In October 2017, a fireworks factory in the industrial district of Tangerang outside Jakarta exploded, killing at least 49 people and leaving 46 injured. It was the deadliest industrial disaster in the nation's history.

Two welders were ordered by their boss, the factory's operations director, to work on a roof below which were stashed the raw materials for 4,000 kg of gunpowder fireworks. Welding sparks flew down from the rooftop and ignited the fireworks, causing a massive explosion that destroyed the warehouse and swept through the adjacent factory building.

As at the Sambirejo factory, employees were trapped inside as the rear exit was locked. With the building rapidly filling with smoke, they were left with no choice but to try to escape out the front through a wall of flames. Most of the survivors suffered severe burn injuries, two of whom later died in hospital.

After an investigation, the Indonesia National Commission of Human Rights revealed that the factory was falsely registered as a toy factory. Fireworks factories are illegal in densely populated areas such as Tangerang. It was permitted to hire only 10 employees, but had a workforce of 103 people at the time of the explosion, all criminally underpaid. Among the dead workers were several children between the ages of 14 and 16.

Saleh Partaonan Daulay, a parliamentary member of the National Mandate Party (PAN), told the press that he had asked the Minister of Manpower to immediately go to the scene of the accident. "The Minister must see it firsthand and meet with the victims and their families," he said. "This is part of the responsibility that needs to be fulfilled."

This response was aimed at quelling public anger and misleading people into believing that action would be done to prevent similar tragedies in the future. After the factory's owner and operations director were arrested, the fire was ignored by the government and nothing was done to improve national safety standards.

Nearly two years after Tangerang fireworks disaster, the same hazardous working conditions and utter neglect of workplace safety continues, as the Sambirejo fire has demonstrated.

6 July 2019