

Anger Grows in Mexico After Sweatshop Collapse Kills Dozens of Women



Mexico City, September 27 (RHC)-- In Mexico City, social movements and working people are in mourning after the devastating 7.1-magnitude earthquake of September 19th demolished a four-story factory in the working-class Colonia Obrera district of the Cuauhtemoc borough, claiming dozens of laborers' lives.

While authorities allege that around 25 workers died in the disaster, locals claim the number is impossible because anywhere from 50 to over 100 workers were employed at the sweatshop-like facility. Most of the workers were undocumented Asian women, as well as Central Americans, who worked seamstresses.

The dramatic collapse of the building, located on Simon Bolivar #168 at the corner of Chimalpopoca, was captured in one of the most widely-shared videos to come out of the earthquake. Taken within a minute of the initial quake, the video shows teenagers nervously talking in a parking lot before a large red-brick building collapses in a span of about two seconds.

The factory's collapse – and the authorities' subsequent response – is the latest embarrassment for Mexico's government, which is reeling from widespread popular anger over social conditions that have

made September's twin earthquakes immeasurably worse.

The government had hoped to display its earthquake readiness on the morning of September 19th, when it held major earthquake drills to mark the 32-year anniversary of an 8.0-magnitude earthquake that, at the time, buried about 10,000 people. The workers in the factory – which itself managed to stand after the 1985 quake – weren't allowed to take part in the drill. When the quake struck two hours later, only 20 people were estimated to have escaped from the building's narrow stairwell and even narrower entryway before the structure entombed its inhabitants.

"There were people working inside, maybe a hundred people – seamstresses," local resident Beatriz Ballinas told BBC Mundo. "Those who didn't make it out were the workers on the (top floors). They were the ones who got trapped."

Neighbors, paramedics, construction workers and youth soon swarmed onto the location in a desperate attempt to clear the debris and recover survivors. Within hours, the number of people moving glass and debris swelled into the hundreds as tools were delivered, a field kitchen was erected and the rescue brigades began to self-organize. Brigadistas – which included members of the Asian and Jewish communities, local laborers and clergy – worked around the clock as rumors swirled that some survivors may have escaped to a basement underneath the factory.

As officers from the federal government and public security secretariat arrived to seal the area off to prevent grief-stricken relatives from entering the site, tensions grew. Interior Minister Miguel Angel Osorio Chong soon visited the scene surrounded by tactical police, waving to the crowd as if he were on the campaign trail. The mood quickly soured and people began jeering and cursing the official.

Pieces of debris were thrown at Osorio's head accompanied by angry whistles and shouts of "puta madre." The people's mood was made clear: this is the scene of a crime, not a photo opportunity. The official quickly fled. After three days – in which 25 bodies were recovered and two survivors rescued – the brigade's work ground to a halt.

Scores of armored riot police arrived to expel volunteers from the disaster zone while authorities announced that no basement existed and the area was a "dead zone." According to Patricia Barragan, a coordinator from the Feminist Brigade that led the rescue efforts, federal officials then began shoving volunteers around and confiscated tools, material, food and medicine that had been donated, loading it onto trucks. Before long, brigadistas and police officers began throwing objects at one another until the volunteers were overwhelmed and fled. Witnesses claim that during the ensuing chaos, police kicked and beat youth as they fell to the ground.

Ricardo Contreras Santana, one of the workers in the building who survived the quake, told Animal Politico there were around 50 people in the building. According to his account, the bottom floor had the highest number of workers. It consisted of an office, a children's clothing store and a stockroom for spare auto parts.

The second floor belonged to Jenny Imports, a toy store owned by a South Korean family. The third floor was a sweatshop for women's clothing owned by Jose Lee, an employer of Chinese origin, while the fourth floor belonged to Argentine businessman Jaime Azkenazi, who died in the collapse.

The number of dead still remains unclear. Because Bolivar #168 was hidden in the shadows of the informal economy, authorities were never informed of how many people were actually employed at the facility. While many claim that the workers were Central American – causing a delegation of diplomats from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador to visit the scene – most of the identified bodies recovered belonged to Mexican nationals or workers from South Korea and Taiwan. The whereabouts of several workers still remain unknown to the public.

“Industrial homicide” was the term La Izquierda Diario used to describe the tragedy, noting that culpability for the deaths doesn't lie with “nature” but with the employers who exploited the workers under such precarious conditions within such a flimsy building. While the disaster may have been natural, the deaths were unnatural and a result of industrial homicide.

“The quake was a natural catastrophe, but the disaster it caused is human and social,” the editorial said. “Industrial homicide condemns those employers who fail to comply with security measures and instead, put the lives of workers and employees at risk.”

“The bosses did not want to lose any of their profits and their voracity continued in the middle of the disaster.”

The left-wing paper then offers a damning account by a member of the Feminist Brigade: “When removing the debris, the owners instructed us to separate all the fabric, furniture, hooks, cloth and spare parts and to store in a container that was left on the foot of the premises ... They arrived on Tuesday, then left. They returned Wednesday afternoon with the same singular concern: how much material was lost, and how much could be recovered.”

The brigade has issued an open letter demanding a full accounting of the tragedy, including the names of those rescued alive along with the addresses of the hospitals where they are staying; those found dead along with the location of their bodies; those known to have been employed at the factory but who haven't since appeared; as well as the legal and migratory status of all employees at Bolivar #168.

The brigade is also demanding that survivors and bereaved relatives be fully compensated regardless of migratory status and national origin and that none should be persecuted or deported.

On Sunday, local residents, volunteers and members of the Feminist Brigade gathered at the ruins of Bolivar #168 – which had been quickly sanitized and cleared of debris by the government's bulldozers – to hold a memorial. As drums played in the background, people carefully arranged colorful banners, women's clothes, shoes and flowers around a cross inscribed with the words: “Your name is mine – Truth is memory and justice.”

For several minutes, members of the group held a moment of silence, each with an arm outstretched and a fist clenched. While some wept, others angrily choked back tears. In the midst of a natural disaster amplified by the negligence of authorities and greed of employers, the women had one simple message to send: “Alive or dead, our bodies are not rubble.”

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