

3 Migrant Labourers Die in House Fire: Accidental or Preventable?

While it's easy enough to read in the newspaper that several construction workers died in a house fire this weekend in Jidhafs, what's more difficult is uncovering the underlying problems that caused three Bangladeshis to die. Truly, in an age where fatally-burned migrants are easily replaced by an unending supply of willing foreign labour, taking time to identify the causes and preventative measures we can learn from this fire has fallen too far down on the list of priorities.

When the MWPS arrived on the scene only 24 hours after the blaze, a backhoe was already hard at work, clearing away the debris and any other evidence that could have been used by forensic experts over the course of an investigation. Apart from the broken and dangling "Police Line" tape, there were no signs or indications that such an investigation had taken place. Had the house been home to the owner of a bank or someone with social clout, how much more attention might this destruction have received? If it had been locals and not migrant workers that died in the fire, how many days would the police have spent investigating the wreckage to identify what really caused the blaze?

Speaking to the workers who survived this tragedy, MWPS Labour Safety and Welfare Committee learned that this tenement did not conform to the existing laws regarding the living conditions of labourers. To bring down the cost of rent, the original renters subletted the rooms to additional workers, bring the total personnel for the 4 bedroom house up to 22 workers. And while this clearly is indicative of a lack of awareness of fire-safety

protocols at the level of the workers, what involvement did the landlord have in overseeing his property? How often did he visit this aging home and when, if ever, did the authorities concern themselves with a tenement containing more than the permitted limit of inhabitants? Unfortunately, it would seem that interest in this home came only after it was incinerated and took with it three men with families.



When faced with tragedies such as these, it's easy to think that truck-loads of waste and debris clean up the mess in its entirety. But despite the charred bedsprings and crumbling cement blocks, the physical destruction does not tell the whole story. In fact, it is only a starting point for the cleanup. The real cleanup begins with the respect we afford other members of the human race--other members of our society and in particular, those to whom we delegate work we find unfit for ourselves. Along with the respect owed to the construction workers who lived in that house in Jidhafs goes a very real duty that we can not ignore: a duty of concern that we are all guilty of ignoring. There were chances and opportunities to learn about the conditions these men were living in, but those will forever be missed opportunities. There was a time to care about 22 workers sharing one roof and to concern ourselves with their well-being, but that time has long since expired.

The best we can do now is to soberly look back on lessons this tragedy can teach us. So that next time we're counting the bodies before and not after they go up in flames. So that after the next fire, we're not wondering what caused it but are working aggressively on the solution to prevent another. If we fail to realize that the deaths of these Bangladeshis could have been avoided with proper oversight, interest and maintenance of safety standards, we're not just failing this Kingdom's labour force but we're failing ourselves as men and women that should be interested in the welfare of others. When the least-known in a society become marginalized and worse; ignored, we fail to uphold the mandate to treat others with the same respect we demand and we tell the world that significance and respect should be functions of wealth and material success, rather than than of the intrinsic personhood we all share.

What would it look like to be agent of change? Perhaps daring to stand for those who can not stand themselves and with your own voice, speaking for those who have none. If you are reading this, you are of in the top fifth privileged class of all the people in this world. Use that privilege and leverage your time, your talent and your resources for the good of victims like these, so that they would know in the deepest part of their being, that like you and I, they are not forgotten.



-John Rafferty for the Migrant Workers Protection Society