

Brazilian Kiss nightclub disaster

The recent deadly fire that broke out during a college party at Kiss, a nightclub in Santa Maria, a college town of 260,000 people in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil's southernmost state has resulted in real tragedy. While the 615 square-meter club's capacity is under 700 people, it was packed with an estimated 1,200 to 1,300 people. 236 youngsters were killed and more than 169 hospitalized for smoke inhalation and burns, with dozens of them in critical condition. Most of the dead were college students 18 to 21 years old. Reports indicate that the toll would make this disaster as one of the deadliest nightclub fires in more than a decade.

The fire started at around 2:30 AM when a band performing at the club let off as part of its show cheap fireworks meant for outdoor use instead of the more expensive indoor fireworks. The band that was onstage pointed the flares upward. The club's ceiling ignited and, because of a malfunctioning fire extinguisher, the blaze spread throughout the packed club at lightning speed, emitting thick, toxic smoke. Those inside panicked as they tried to get out and smoke made them lose their sense of direction. About 50 of the victims were found in the club's two bathrooms apparently confusing their doors with the exit door. At least 90 percent of the victims died of smoke inhalation rather than burns.

The club had combustible insulating foam material in the ceiling, and faulty fire safety equipment. It had neither an alarm nor a sprinkler system and had only one exit. Moreover metal barriers used to keep people in line on their way in, ended up blocking people from getting out. Firefighters had to open a hole in the outer wall to allow more people to escape.

Brazil is far away, however, its tragedy hits close to home and stirs painful memories everywhere. One cannot help but notice the similarities between this tragedy and others happening several years earlier. In 1961, a fire swept through a circus killing 503 people in Niteroi, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In 2000, a welding accident reportedly set off a fire at a club in Luoyang, China, killing 309 people. In 2003 a blaze at the Station nightclub in West Warwick, Rhode Island, USA, has killed 100 people and injured 200. A flare ignited ceiling foam at an overcrowded nightclub in Buenos Aires, Argentina, killing 194 people in 2004. Indoor fireworks were blamed for a fire at a club in Bangkok on New Year's Eve 2008 in which 66 partygoers were killed. Another indoor fireworks display at a nightclub in Perm, Russia, ignited a plastic ceiling decorated with branches, killing 152 people in December 2009.

Unfortunately, lessons learned from previous disasters are quickly forgotten. Lives were wasted in Santa Maria, because precautions that should have been taken were just neglected. Following the Rhode Island disaster, specific rules and regulations forced many venues in the USA to install sprinkler systems and make other expensive renovations including the use of fireproof material, installation of new doors and stairways as well as appropriate lighting and indications of exit locations. Nightclubs were also required to have emergency plans and have trained crowd management personnel on scene during each show.

Even though every disaster stirs greater awareness about fire safety among the general public, implementation of necessary prevention measures is rapidly confronted with economic realities and weak political will. The tragedy in Santa Maria should force serious reflection over widespread culture of leniency, contempt and corruption endemic across the globe particularly in developing countries.

Only when Penny-pinching and business driven mind for maximum gain at minimal cost is set aside and when human life becomes more valuable than any incurring costs necessary to provide a safer environment, can our youth enjoy life and party till daybreak without embracing the kiss of death. Till that day, similar disasters will happen again and unfortunately numerous lives will still be lost.

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