



By: TA | AP Insight

Hong Kong's deadly blaze opened a Pandora's box of corruption and safety lapses



Uncomfortable questions are being raised over who is to blame for Hong Kong's **deadliest blaze** in decades.

As the territory mourns over the high-rise apartment fire that killed at least 156 people, anger and frustration are mounting over building safety lapses, suspected construction corruption and lax government oversight.

But bigger issues are at play. Some political analysts and observers say the tragedy could be the "tip of an iceberg" in Hong Kong, a city whose skyline is built on high-rise buildings.

Suspicious of bid-rigging and use of hazardous construction materials in renovation projects across other housing estates have left many worried the disaster could be repeated.

Police and the city's anti-corruption body have arrested 14 people so far in a wide-ranging probe into a multi-million dollar renovation project at the Wang Fuk Court apartment complex, where the fire broke out on Wednesday.

Those detained include **scaffolding subcontractors**, directors of a construction company and a consultancy, many of them on suspicion of manslaughter and gross negligence.

Officials focus on safety of materials

"The question (one) should be asking, really is that, what happened at Wang Fuk Court, can it happen elsewhere?" said Steve Tsang, director of the SOAS China Institute in London.

Hong Kong officials initially said tests of green netting covering **bamboo scaffolding** at the housing complex in suburban Tai Po showed that it met fire safety codes, but highly flammable foam panels used to seal windows during the repairs, aided by strong winds, caused the blaze to spread swiftly between seven of the eight towers in the complex.

But on Monday, Eric Chan, Hong Kong's chief secretary, said that seven of 20 additional samples collected later from the site failed to meet safety standards.

Authorities said there was evidence contractors cut costs by using cheaper substandard netting along with standard materials to pad their profits, after a typhoon in July damaged some of the netting originally installed.

Some fire alarms failed to sound when the fire broke out, residents and officials said.

It did open a Pandora's box - John Burns

"It did open a Pandora's box," said John Burns, an honorary professor of politics and public administration at the University of Hong Kong (HKU).

"You've got all of these issues which have been swept under the table," said HKU's Burns. "Because of all that we now know -- or believe we know -- about bid-rigging, collusion, corruption, no fire alarms, government negligence, all of these things have come out."

As a precaution, authorities **suspended work** on renovations at 28 other projects managed by the same construction company.

With residents of high-rises worried, contractors were removing foam boards and netting used to cover scaffolding at other projects.

The netting "is not a one particular estate problem. It's a much wider general problem," said Tsang of SOAS.

Residents raised concerns before the fire

Government oversight also has come into question. Residents of Wang Fuk Court had been voicing **safety concerns** to the authorities

about construction materials such as netting used in the renovations, according to documents reviewed by The Associated Press.

The Labor Department said it reviewed netting's product quality certificate and found it "in line" with standards. It also said it had conducted 16 inspections at the complex since last year — most recently about a week before the fire — and had warned contractors repeatedly they had to ensure they met fire safety requirements.

As critics raise questions about government accountability, Hong Kong officials are emphasizing actions they have taken against the contractors, and aid provided to the victims.

"The focus of the people's anger is on not so much the kinds of materials used (but the) lack of supervision and oversight from (government) departments," said Willy Lam, a political analyst and senior fellow at The Jamestown Foundation.

An independent committee led by a judge will investigate the fire

Responding to public pressure, the territory's chief executive, John Lee, said Tuesday that an independent committee led by a judge will investigate the fire.

He brushed aside a question from a reporter on if he should keep his job.

"Yes, we need a reform. Yes, we have identified failures in different stages. That is exactly why we must act seriously to ensure that all these loopholes are plugged," he said, adding that the "whole building renovation system" will also be reformed to prevent any further such disasters.

Ronny Tong, an adviser to Lee, deflected questions about possible lax enforcement. "Some people have broken the law and they were deliberately trying to deceive authorities. This is not the problem of those who enforce the laws, right?"

Oversight is seen as lacking

Critics say bid-rigging and other collusion, inflated costs and a lack of transparency are common in Hong Kong projects.

Multilayered subcontracting chains, which are common for big projects, raise the risks for substandard work and limited oversight, said Jason Poon, a contractor turned activist who has exposed problems at other Hong Kong construction projects.



The disaster may overshadow an election on Dec. 7 for Hong Kong's Legislative Council if angry voters stay away

"This is just the tip of an iceberg," Poon said.

Hong Kong, a former British colony that was handed to Chinese control in 1997, increasingly has cracked down on dissent and criticism of the government, which is deemed politically sensitive.

A sweeping national security law imposed by Beijing in 2020 after a crackdown on massive pro-democracy protests already has effectively eliminated most **public dissent**.

So, Beijing's national security arm in Hong Kong and local officials moved quickly to stifle accusations of government negligence over the deadly blaze.

On Saturday, the organizer of a petition calling for officials to take responsibility for the fire was arrested by **national security police**, local media including the online media outlet HK01 reported.

The Office for Safeguarding National Security in Hong Kong warned that the city's tough national security law would be imposed against "anti-China" forces who use the fire to "incite hatred against authorities".

The disaster may overshadow an election on Dec. 7 for Hong Kong's Legislative Council if angry voters stay away, said Jean-Pierre Cabestan, a locally-based political scientist and a senior research fellow at Paris's Asia Centre think tank.

Turnout for such votes is scrutinized by Beijing as an indicator of approval of the semi-autonomous territory's "patriots-only" governance system.

"The question for the Hong Kong government is: do they care about what the people think?" Burns said. "They absolutely should. (And) if they ignore public opinion, I think, on this issue, this is a huge mistake."