Blaze at Illegal Plastics Market Kills at Least 19

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KOLKATA, India (AP) — A fire broke out at an illegal six-story plastics market in the Indian city of Kolkata early Wednesday, killing at least 19 people, police said.

The blaze, which started before 4 a.m., was likely caused by a short circuit, said West Bengal fire minister Javed Khan. The fire was under control by mid-morning, he said, but toxic gases being released by the blaze were hampering rescue efforts.

A police official, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to the media, said at least 19 people had died. He said police were looking for the owner of the building, which was filled with dozens of small shops selling various plastic products.

Another 10 people were hospitalized in critical condition and the death toll was expected to rise, Khan said.

He called the scene of the fire "an illegal, unauthorized market."

However, local residents said the market had been operating in the building for nearly 40 years. They said there was only one entrance to the building, which made rescue efforts difficult.

The building housed several warehouses on its upper floors where chemicals, paper and plastics were stored.

Police said the victims were porters working in the market who also slept there at night. Eighteen of the dead were men.

Mamata Banerjee, the state's top elected official, visited the site soon after the blaze was brought under control and ordered the building's owners to install fire safety equipment within two months.

Banerjee said the previous government that ruled the state for more than three decades had allowed the building to operate without any permits or safety measures.

She said she has ordered police, firefighters and the city administration to file a report on the cause of the blaze and take steps to prevent the recurrence of such fires.

In December 2011, at least 93 people died in a fire in a hospital in Kolkata. Soon after that, Banerjee promised that her government would crack down on lax safety procedures in public buildings.

Safety regulations are routinely ignored in India, where fire escapes and evacuation drills are rare. Even if fire extinguishers are present, they are almost never serviced.

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