Death Toll Hits 120 in Deadly China Fire

BEIJING (AP) — Authorities raised the death toll Wednesday by one to 120 in this week's disastrous fire at a northeast China poultry processing plant, with another 17 people unaccounted for.

The State Administration of Work Safety said a total of 395 people were at work during Monday's tragedy, the country's worst industrial accident in almost five years.

State media reports said about 90 percent of the victims were women recruited from nearby farming villages to work part time at the sprawling Jilin Baoyuanfeng Poultry Co. plant.

Workers said all but one of the plant's exits were locked at the time of the fire, in a clear violation of Chinese laws and safety regulations.

Authorities have detained the plant's owner and managers, and a special commission appointed by China's Cabinet is investigating the fire. Initial reports said it appeared to have been sparked by an explosion caused by leaking ammonia, a chemical kept pressurized as part of the cooling system in meat processing plants.

The disaster highlighted continuing worker safety problems in China, where about 70,000 people are killed on the job each year, due partly to corruption, poor training and lax enforcement by regulators.

It came almost 20 years after a similar fire in a toy factory in the southern city of Shenzhen where 87 young workers were killed because exits also were locked, allegedly to prevent theft.

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