Safety at Deadly China Plant 'Extremely Chaotic'

CHRISTOPHER BODEEN, Associated Press

EIJING (AP) — China's workplace safety agency said negligence among factory managers and government inspectors caused "extremely chaotic" work-safety conditions at a poultry plant where a deadly fire killed 120 workers this week.

In this photo taken Tuesday June 4, 2013, Chinese paramilitary policemen go through the burnt factory of Jilin Baoyuanfeng Poultry Co. in Dehui city in northeast China's Jilin province. China's workplace safety agency said negligence among factory managers and government inspectors caused "extremely chaotic" work-safety conditions at a poultry plant where a deadly fire killed 120 workers this week. **(AP Photo)**

Safety exits were blocked at the Jilin Baoyuanfeng Poultry Co. plant and managers neglected to hold required safety drills or worker education, State Administration of Work Safety head Yang Dongliang said in a statement posted Friday on the administration's website, confirming workers' accounts. No one at the plant took responsibility for safety, while the relevant local government departments failed to make proper inspections, Yang said.

The preliminary findings came just four days after the deadly fire in Jilin province in northeastern China. The speed with which officials reacted suggests they have learned from past industrial disasters in which slow and incomplete responses have aroused considerable public anger.

"An initial investigation shows that the management of work safety at this plant was extremely chaotic," Yang was quoted as telling investigators and other officials Thursday at a meeting in Changchun, Jilin's capital.

"The accident also revealed that local government and relevant departments failed in their responsibilities while oversight and inspection work was weak and incomplete. This was a serious case of negligence," Yang said.

Monday's fire was China's deadliest industrial accident in five years and highlighted the continuing gross neglect of worker safety, despite the growth and sophistication of the world's second-largest economy.

Yang's accusations raise the likelihood of prosecutions over the disaster, of both company and government officials, although it's unclear whether any high-ranking officials will be dismissed.

The open response so far has been in stark contrast to the way officials have handled some past disasters, including a July 2011 high-speed rail collision that killed 40 people and injured nearly 200. Railway officials were mocked over their actions, such as ordering wreckage to be cleared before all survivors had been found, curtailing state media coverage and refusing to answer basic questions about the accident's cause. That was seen as undermining public confidence not only in China's hugely ambitious high-speed rail system, but in the leadership of former Premier Wen Jiabao.

Chinese President Xi Jinping, on a trip abroad that includes an informal summit in California with President Barack Obama, issued a statement Friday expressing concern about the heavy casualties in recent workplace accidents in China and urged that more be done to prevent them.

"Life is the most important thing and development must not proceed at the price of human lives. People's lives must be put above everything," Xi said in a statement read out on state broadcaster CCTV.

While the official cause of the poultry plant disaster hasn't been announced, initial reports said the fire 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 fire broke out during a shift change when about 350 workers were at the plant.

In addition to the dead, 77 workers were hospitalized with injuries, while another 17 workers earlier listed as missing had been found alive, according to the Jilin provincial government. State media said that about 90 percent of the victims were female, that their ages ranged from 17 to the 50s and that they were from nearby farming villages.

The plant's owner and managers have been taken into police custody and its assets have been frozen. Jilin province has ordered a wide-ranging crackdown on fire safety violations, as well as checks on mines and industries dealing with fireworks and dangerous chemicals.

Workers quoted in state media said exits were locked to secure the property and to keep them from stepping outside for breaks, despite a law requiring that safety exits be kept open and clearly marked. China's labor law also mandates safe working conditions.

Only a single door was open to permit escape. Workers trampled each other in the

dark trying to survive.

People who monitor labor conditions in China say enforcement of workplace safety laws is lax, with factories themselves usually left to decide whether or not to follow them.

Officials will likely seek to step in quickly to compensate families of fire victims. That is considered to be a key step in maintaining public order — the government's overwhelming priority in a society where even minor disputes can turn into riots and attacks on government offices.

Levels of compensation follow a complicated formula, but payment is usually made in cash by the government, with the responsible private companies and individuals later ordered to reimburse the state.

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