

Baku Fire Deaths Prompt Safety Review

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Officials blame plastic cladding used to dress up buildings as Baku prepares for summer sports event.

A fire that killed 16 people and destroyed an apartment block in the Azerbaijani capital Baku has raised fears about building standards, as the city undergoes a makeover ahead of next month's European Games.

Although the fire service was swiftly on the scene when the 16-storey block caught fire on May 19, officers could not check the flames as the plastic cladding on the building's exterior burned uncontrollably over four hours. Four of the 16 residents who died were young children. Fifty others were injured, and most were later said to be in serious condition.

"When I came to in the evening, a doctor told me I had lost two children – three-year-old Farah and my unborn baby," Gunay Maharramova told the [Minval.az](#) news service. "Then I stopped feeling the aching pain of the wounds I received in the fire, and a new fire started inside me that no one and nothing can ever put out."

The government swiftly set up a commission to look into the tragedy, and President Ilham Aliiev chaired its first meeting on May 20. Deputy Prime Minister Abid Sharifov, appointed to head the commission, said residents of the gutted apartment block in Baku's Binagadi district would be given temporary accommodation and 20,000 manats (19,500 US dollars) per household in compensation, while families who lost members would get another 15,000 manats each.

Sharifov indicated that building and safety standards had not been observed, and Prosecutor General Zakir Qaralov pointed to the exterior plastic cladding, saying it had not been checked or certified.

The minister for emergencies, Kamaledin Heydarov, clarified that a certificate had been used for the use of a particular material, but the manufacturers had not made it with the right fire-resistant additives.

Addressing commission members, President Aliyev made his displeasure clear.

"When I ask, no one knows anything. The local government chiefs don't know anything and nor do the city government heads. No one knows," he said. "I've said before that there needs to be order, and first and foremost, all officials must set an example. Sites are misappropriated and illegal building works take place on them. Then they document it by illegal means.... If this happens again, I won't just sack these people, they'll be prosecuted. No one is untouchable in this country."

So far, the prosecution service says it has brought charges against four individuals – the director-general of the company that made the cladding, the head and deputy head of the construction firm that applied it, the former head of economic management in the Binagadi district government, and the head of a local housing management office. All are accused of abusing their positions and breaking fire regulations.

The commission has ordered inflammable cladding material to be removed from similar buildings in Baku.

The cladding, made of a plastic called styrofoam, was only put on recently, apparently as a quick-fix way of sprucing up Baku and other cities ahead of the European Games, the first of their kind, which Azerbaijan is hosting on June 12-28. (See [Lavish Spending on Euro-Games as Azeri Economy Falter](#).)

Baku's mayor Hajibala Abutalibov believes that the city has 140 buildings with Styrofoam cladding, while emergencies minister Heydarov said there were around 260 in Azerbaijan as a whole.

Natiq Jafarli of the opposition movement REAL believes there are many more than that.

"The information we have is that there are more than 800 of these buildings," he said, estimating that the cost of applying the initial cladding, stripping it off and applying a safer material could run to 800 or 900 million dollars, money that could have been better spent on education, healthcare and welfare.

Mirvari Qahramanli, head of the Organisation for Protecting Oil Workers' Rights, says it is not just the manufacturers who are to blame, but also the government agencies responsible for safety standards.

"Sadly, previous fires of this kind were simply ignored. It took people being burned alive in their own homes to jolt state institutions into action," she said. "We mustn't allow the principal culprits to shift the blame to others and go unpunished themselves. Everyone is aware that the company didn't put the cladding on buildings of its own accord. It had permission from government authorities and from the safety agencies."

Baku residents have been complaining about fire hazards since two fires, one this year that affected an apartment block in the city's Ahmedli district, a similar one in the nearby town of Sumgait in 2014, and another in 2013 that gutted a wing of the capital's medical university. No one died in these fires, but after the most recent one, residents of the Ahmedli district asked the emergencies ministry to look at the safety implications. The ministry responded that the plastic cladding had been checked and was absolutely safe.

When the latest fire broke out in Binagadi, many people came to the scene and there were scuffles as police tried to drive them away. In other parts of Baku, the residents of blocks with similar cladding also took to the streets. Some started removing the styrofoam themselves, and local police eventually gave up trying to stop them, although dozens of people were detained.

Zamin Haji also found himself in a police cell for several hours after posting a Facebook urging people to strip the styrofoam cladding from their homes. "This affects your children's lives directly. Strip it off and save yourselves before it's too late," he wrote.

While in detention, Haji was told not to make this kind of appeal again as it "goes against the mindset and fortune of the people and the country".

Nurgul Novruz is the pseudonym of an Azerbaijani journalist.

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