

Italian textile factory fire deaths highlight conditions for migrant workers

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Seven workers die in a makeshift dormitory in Prato, noted for garment firms operating on the fringe of legality.

At least seven people died and three were injured when a clothing factory in an industrial zone in the Italian town of Prato burned down on Sunday, killing workers trapped in an improvised dormitory built on the site.

Local media said 11 workers had been accommodated in a warren of small cardboard sleeping compartments above a warehouse in the Macrolotto industrial district of the town, known for its large number of garment factories.

“This is a disgrace for all of us, because we have to recognise this reality for what it is: the biggest concentration of illegal employment in northern and central Italy,” said Enrico Rossi, president of the region of Tuscany.

Footage posted on the website of the local *Il Tirreno* newspaper showed fire crews battling the flames in a warehouse-like structure while smoke poured out of the building. Ambulances and police vehicles were also on the scene.

The disaster prompted immediate questions about the conditions on the site and in a network of similar workshops operating in the area, which is noted for its large number of Chinese-owned textile manufacturing businesses, many operating on the fringes of legality.

“No one can say they are surprised at this because everyone has known for years that, in the area between Florence and Prato, hundreds if not thousands of people are living and working in conditions of near-slavery,” Roberto Pistonina, secretary general of the Florence and Prato section of the CISL trade union, said on his Facebook page.

Prato, a town with one of the highest concentrations of Chinese immigrants in Italy, has at least 15,000 legally registered in a total population of under 200,000, with more than 4,000 Chinese-owned businesses, according to official data.

Thousands more Chinese immigrants are believed to be living in the city illegally, working for a network of wholesalers and workshops turning out cheap clothing for the export market as well as well-known retail chains.

The disaster underlined the unsafe conditions in which the workers are employed in many of the workshops, although there was no immediate word on what may have started the blaze.

“The worst thing was hearing the cries of the people trapped inside,” said Leonardo Tuci, an off-duty police official who saw the fire and sounded the alarm. “I did what I could, I dragged two people out,

I'm only sorry I couldn't do more."

"I think the flames caught them in their sleep," he said.

A fire official quoted by the *Corriere della Sera* daily said there were clear violations of safety rules in the factory and evidence of unauthorised building work to put up the dormitories.

The mayor of Prato, Roberto Cenni, said there were "thousands of situations potentially as tragic as this one" in the industrial zone around the city and said he had been in contact with the interior minister, Angelino Alfano, to combat the illegal "parallel district" which had grown up around the workshops.

Reuters in Rome

P.S.

* theguardian.com, Monday 2 December 2013 00.59 GMT