

BENI SWEIF FIRE

Undoubtedly, the Beni Sweif fire incident should be tackled from the perspective of a crisis study, investigation-wise and analytically. This incident displays all pre-crisis elements – inception of the crisis – handling the crisis – escalation of the crisis – climax of the crisis – costs & losses incurred, and finally, lessons derived from the crisis and both reform procedures and precautionary procedures to avoid recurrence of the error.

Upon reviewing the Egyptian codes and some international codes, particularly the Saudi, Emirates, British and European, we could describe the crisis, drawn from declared sources, as follows:

▪ Prelude to Pre-Crisis:

- 1-** Are cultural palaces qualified to exhibit shows, inadvertently? Do they meet security conditions required in small theatres, concerning adequate exits in proportion to numbers of spectators and the availability of fire extinguishers on stage and in the theatre?
- 2-** Are there trained personnel, capable of acting promptly, in case an accident falls?
- 3-** Are there sustainable instructions to light the theatre, immediately, upon the first sign of danger, as stipulated in codes?

▪ **Pre-Crisis Elements:**

To run a show that involves use of open flames “candles”, without prior consent and without adopting the necessary precautions to face any potential accident, involves the negligence of too many details, such as the type and quantity of candles used in the show, their vicinity from inflammable matter like the stage curtain, the checking of exit doors and emergency lights and the presence of security officers, who are aware of their roles and duties.

It is noteworthy that all these procedures should not be different in a small theatre in the capital and another in one of the provinces or villages, as security is integral.

▪ **Inception of Crisis**

The crisis starts with a dark hall and a dimly lit stage. The scene takes place in candlelight. This is an optimal environment for a catastrophe, where one of the lit candles falls and the stage curtain catches fire. Still, the spectators remain under the spell of the show, thinking that what is happening has nothing to do with them “part of the show”.

This is followed by acts of bravery, with some trying to assist others.

▪ **Escalation of Crisis, Climax & Out-of-Control Situation**

A flow of spectators starts rushing out of the theatre, while another group of people try to get in.

This blocks the exit, putting people in the circle of danger. The hazard here arises from inhaling smoke and losing consciousness, to be followed by being affected with the heat and flames at a later stage.

The main location of the fire is on stage, where a curtain of hot flames arises. This prohibits those behind stage to quit, among which are actors, technicians and individuals.

The fire then spreads to seats in the hall, where escaping would be impossible without coverage under a blanket or the like, in order to cut through the blazing flames, which can only be done by professional firemen.

▪ **Handling the Crisis**

Security officers and personnel of the cultural palace intervene, trying to assist those who have fled, carrying the unconscious ones to the nearest hospital for treatment.

The whole city – officials & inhabitants – remains vigilant all night, till the early hours of the day, fretting about those lying in hospital.

▪ **Costs & Losses**

The incident results in 44 death cases and 26 injuries. The theatre is a total loss. A crisis of lack of confidence falls upon the Cultural Palace Authority, escalating to the extent of prompting the Minister of Culture to submit his resignation, only a month or so before the end of the Cabinet term.

Then comes the cost of rebuilding the destroyed cultural palace from scratch, as well as costs incurred from work suspended till rebuilding is completed, this, apart from wasted artistic talents falling victims of the fire, at a time when Egypt is in dire need of such talents in a period that is witnessing regress and rarity of artistic talents.

▪ **Lessons Derived, Reform Procedures & Precautionary Procedures to Avoid Recurrence**

- 1- It is necessary to respect protection codes of establishments against fire hazards, where all parties are to abide by them, even State authorities that believe themselves to be above the Law;
- 2- It is necessary for the State - represented in this case in the Ministry of Culture - to insure these palaces and theatres against fire, theft & robbery and civil liability towards others. This should be done in spite of obsolete governmental decrees that were issued in the past and that prohibited the government from insuring its affiliated establishments, considering that the government was the security authority most concerned over the individuals and responsible for compensating them, in case of damage. In doing so, the government ignored a vital aspect of follow-up and of provision of equipment and risk management, which is provided by insurance companies, according to articles of insurance policies. This cannot be done by an insured party, himself, without external supervision;
- 3- It is necessary to set up a central department for fire and civil defence within the Ministry of Culture. This department is to be responsible for inspection and review, as well as application of fire codes in cultural palaces,

museums, theatres, cinemas, seasonal festivities and sudden ceremonies, such as “Opera Aïda” and the like, with the aim of combating fires;

- 4- It is necessary to forbid the use of open flames, not only in theatres, but also in museums, cinemas and garages, with the exception of kitchen areas;
- 5- Providing fire extinguishers in adequate numbers that comply with local and international standards. Periodic maintenance contracts are to be concluded with manufacturers of fire extinguishers, in order that liability does not get lost between the manufacturing authority and the maintenance authority;
- 6- It is necessary to pay heed and to safeguard exits against smoke and heat;
- 7- Prohibiting ceremonies to be held in upper floors, except with a permit;
- 8- Applying civil defence & fire services during temporary shows and ceremonies that host large masses of people.

Hopefully, lessons derived are well-absorbed, both at the individual level and the level of establishment and management, as well as at the level of the State and its agencies concerned.

Establishments are to be well equipped with functioning protection kits, because lives and properties of people are a national concern that cannot be subject to any further hazards or risks.