

A Historical Fire Crisis that is worth a Thorough Study

Maybe We Learn the Lesson

Among a great number of researches, I was very much attracted to a recent study issued by the Crises and Disasters Research Unit at the Faculty of Commerce, Ain Shams University.

The research is by Dr. Zakaria Yehia Afifi, and it is on the crisis management of touristic disasters: a case study on Sheraton Heliopolis Hotel fire. The study goes back to March 1998 when it was presented to the Fifth International Arab Conference for Fire Material and Sciences.

This incident led to the burning of an infrastructure worth 847 million pounds which is the cost of rebuilding the hotel after it stopped its operations (238 million pounds) in addition to the lost benefits for the eight years when the hotel was not functioning (8 x 26 millions annually = 208 million pounds).

The loss of market share of the hotel because of stopping the operation over the eight years is estimated at 55 million pounds annually, and thus the total loss becomes 886 million pounds, if we deduce from it the compensation paid by the insurance company for the damage which was 39 million pounds, which was calculated to represent 52% of the total loss value.

All these figures are rough estimations using the base of the fixed annual cost which was supposed to be increased by 5% annually.

This at the end means that the company has lost more than 1000 million pounds because of the mismanagement of this fire crisis and the shortage in the equipments, preparation and performance during the incident.

Therefore, the loss in the GDP because of this incident could be estimated at 3388 million pounds.

When going into the details of Dr. Zakaria Afifi's study which is in three parts, we find that the first part tackled the definition of the crises in general and how they are to be managed.

The study also provided a description of the common features of various crises, especially in the industrial and touristic fields. In the second part, the study reviewed the industrial and touristic crisis management systems as well as the early warning systems that should be used to control the crises.

The third part of the crises tackled in detail the incident of the fire of the Sheraton Hotel and presents an indexed analysis of this incident, starting with the diagnosis of the development of the crisis, and reviewing the relevant hazards to the products and services. The study then represents the learnt lessons from this incident.

At the beginning of the crisis, the fire erupted in the top ceiling of the tent of the Nubian Village of the Hotel and then the fire spread to the higher floors. The fire lasted six hours, till 8 a.m.

The crisis escalated when the fire destroyed completely the six floors of the hotel with all its contents.

All the buildings of the hotel were damaged because of this fire, and thus there was no way of operating the hotel even partially after the incident.

The study reviewed the social and economic costs of this incident and represented the volume of the losses as follows:

Human losses: death of 16 tourists and the injury of 55.

Material losses: the destruction of the whole hotel, as the fire demolished the whole six floors and all its contents.

Labor losses: 276 workers at the hotel became jobless because of lack of coordination between the owner company and the administrating one.

Regarding the hazards related to products and services, the study classified these hazards into three categories:

- A. **High hazards:** involving the hazards of factories, especially technical and pharmaceutical factories as well as banks and financial institutions. In addition to the organizations using sensitive technology, the ground, land, marine and tunnel transportation and the hotels and residential towers as well as the nuclear stations, the airports, the marine ports and the public facilities.
- B. **Mild hazards:** involving the universities, hospitals (non-profit hospitals), museums, retail shops, wire and wireless communication institutions, elevators industry, health clubs, zoo, restaurants, perfume factories and cigarette companies.
- C. **Low hazards:** including the insurance companies, charity institutions, radio and television facilities, services shops, newspapers and magazines, maintenance shops, nurseries, investments and training companies.

Finally, we should point that the modern studies made it quite clear that curing the incident is much more costly than taking precautions against such incident. This means that stopping the damage and facing its collaterals is much graver in cost and effort than preventing the damage from taking place. This leads us to the conclusion of the study and the lessons learnt from this crisis which involves:

First: The necessity of paying attention to the security aspect in hotels, and the inevitability of developing the early warning systems and the relevant fire extinguishing devices.

Second: The importance of taking into consideration the fire specifications and precautions in designing the building according to the fire codes of hotels in order to make such facilities and buildings fire-resistant.

Third: The necessity of disseminating the handheld fire extinguishers and training the personnel how to use them, as this represents the first line of defense in facing fires which usually start as small ones and then spread because of the failure of containing the fire immediately after it breaks, which would at the end lead to a total disaster.

Fourth: The necessity of planning and designing entertainment and recreation places in a sound security way that would make use of the previous mistakes and avoid repeating them.

Fifth: The importance of abiding with the instructions of the Civil Defense Authorities in planning the crisis precautionary systems.

Sixth: Developing a package of crises management that would involve various anticipated scenarios for the emergency situations and how to deal with each of them separately, as this is the way used in many hotels worldwide.

Seventh: Making the fire and security department in the hotel affiliated directly to the higher management of the facility, the way things are applied in industry.

1. Using computers in decision making support in the way that helps predicting the possibility of human or environmental mistakes or flaws.
2. Making such management rely periodically on consultation of experts and specialists on hotels security and safety, and the ones who deal with the neighboring premises.
3. Studying the incidents of crises and disasters of hotels in general to get the higher management to make use of such knowledge in developing its security systems.
4. In this incident there was no automatic fire extinguishing system despite the fact that there was an automatic alarm system in the hotel. Therefore, this was a great defect that would figure the question why not have automatic fire extinguishing systems.
5. There have not been any masks against smoking gases to secure fleet of individuals in this incident, and therefore it's elementary to provide such masks.
6. The exit and escape routes of the hotel were not void of obstacles because they were shut during night for such claimed security reasons which led the aggravation of the crisis.
7. The blankets, mattresses and other cloth materials were not made of the fire-resisting type of cloth.

8. Many of the victims have lost their lives because of the gases and smoke that went into their rooms through the central air-conditioning system which had no tools for shutting off the air passages automatically.

At the end, we should say that the learnt lessons from this tragic incident should be very much taken into consideration for all individuals and for the facility in its administration as a whole.

This should also be taken into consideration at the State level and its authorities and in the minds of the ones involved in the facilities protection and the people in charge of monitoring the validity of such measures, because the life of the individuals and their property is a matter of national interest and it should not be put at risk at any level and never again.