

# An inquiry into a building fire in South Africa that killed 76 finds city authorities responsible

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CAPE TOWN, South Africa (AP) — A report into [a building fire that killed 76 people](#) in South Africa last year has concluded that city authorities should be held responsible because they were aware of serious safety issues at the rundown apartment block at least four years before the blaze.

The nighttime fire at the five-story building in downtown Johannesburg on Aug. 31 was one of South Africa's worst disasters. At least 12 children were among the dead and another 86 people were injured, with some having to leap out of windows to escape the flames.

Others said they threw small children out the windows in the hope that they would be caught by people below. Many of the victims were burned beyond recognition having [become trapped in the overcrowded building](#) and it took authorities weeks to identify bodies using DNA tests.

Retired Judge Sisi Khampepe was put in charge of the inquiry, [which began in October](#). She delivered the first part of her report on Sunday and concluded that the City of Johannesburg, which owns the building, had shown “total disregard” for its “calamitous state.”

In the wake of the fire, hundreds of people were found to be living illegally in the building, some of them in shacks that had been erected in the corridors, the bathrooms and the basement, which was meant to be a parking garage. Emergency services said that the fire extinguishers had been taken off the walls and the main fire escape was found to be locked on the night of the fire.

The inside of the building was strewn with waste and that combined with the makeshift wooden shacks to make the blaze especially deadly, Khampepe's report found.

Yet city officials, national immigration officials and police officers had raided the building in 2019, and “found the distressing living conditions in the building that contributed to the devastation of the fire,” Khampepe told reporters after delivering her report.

She recommended that disciplinary action be taken against the chief executive officer of the Johannesburg Property Company, which oversees the city’s buildings. She also said that the building should be demolished and a plaque erected as a memorial to the dozens of victims.

The tragedy revealed the extent of the decay in parts of [South Africa’s biggest city](#) and economic hub, where many buildings have been “hijacked” by illegal landlords, who rent out space to people desperate for somewhere to live. The buildings are often overcrowded and safety precautions are disregarded.

There was a [stunning development at the inquiry](#) in January when a man due to testify as a resident of the building said that he had started the fire to burn the body of a man he had killed on the orders of a drug dealer.

The man who made the shocking confession [was arrested and charged](#) with 76 counts of murder and arson.