WORLDWATCH

Pair get life in prison after fatal collapse of Shanghai apartments

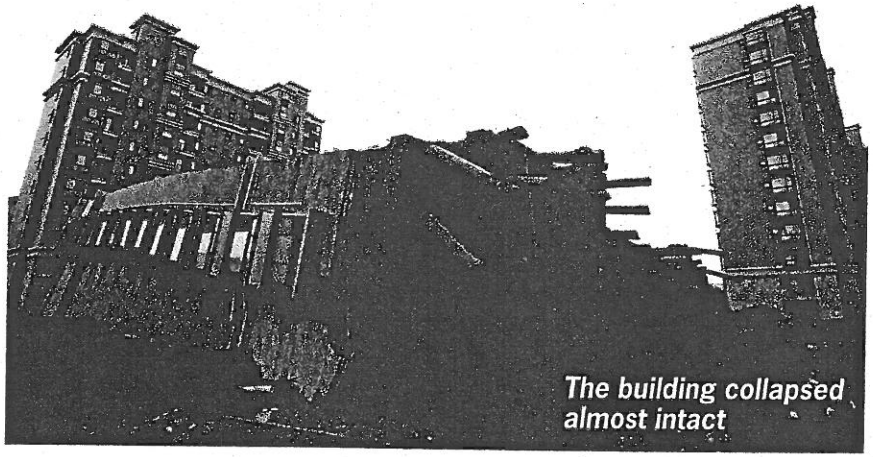
Two executives from a Chinese development firm have been sentenced to life in prison for their part in the collapse of a 13-storey Shanghai apartment block which left one worker dead.

Que Jingde and Zhang Zhiqin of Shanghai Meidu Real Estate were convicted of corruption in late April, with Zhang also being sentenced on two counts of embezzlement and causing an accident.

It is reported in China's state press that Zhang employed an unqualified contractor to construct the underground car park, which was being excavated when the structure collapsed.

The building, part of the new Lotus Riverside residential development, was nearing completion when it toppled over last June, almost intact with its piled foundations uprooted.

An investigation by Chinese authorities last July officially ruled that "unbalanced groundwork" had caused the collapse. Spoil had been piled up to 10m on the north side of the building while a 4.6m deep pit for the car park was being excavated on the south side. Investigators concluded that the pressure difference from the two sides caused settlement which led to the collapse.



The building collapsed almost intact

The case has raised questions about what measures are in place to monitor contractors' qualifications in China.

Construction professionals in the Far East who spoke to *EF* defended the industry, insisting that all the correct safeguards are in place to ensure that only competent firms and workers are used.

Hong Kong Institution of Engineers chairman Philco Nai Keung Wong said that China and the Far East does not have a disproportionately high number of unqualified contractors. "China has regulatory bodies such as the Jiali Group who have guidelines that are supposed to be employed by clients to make sure that their contractors are satisfactory," he said.

However, despite industry-wide quality control measures being in place, they are often not implemented correctly, said Wong, who added that the responsibility can ultimately lie with individual companies. "Working for Gammon, we have our own measures in place. We have standards of control, company procedures and safety and quality audits."

Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB) deputy chief executive Michael Brown said: "In many developing countries like China, and developed countries for that matter, the construction industry is an environment where corrupt practices can take shape. This is in part due to the very nature of the industry and the complex contractual structure that takes place."

Natalie Hardwick