



All government offices and schools will be closed today to observe a day of national loss in the wake of the burning of Wangduephodrang Dzong

The fire that started around 4pm raged on into the night Photo : Nima Wangdi, Kuensel

Historic edifice reduced to ashes

Nation watches in sadness and disbelief a national treasure razed to the ground

SONAM PELDEN,
WANGDUEPHODRANG

Except for the safe boxes containing the sacred relics (ngangtens) that were dropped from the roof into the nearby cacti undergrowth, nothing could be saved from yesterday's fire that burnt away 374 years of history in five hours.

Hundreds of people, who rushed to the Wangduephodrang dzong around 4pm, watched in dismay and tears, as the fortress, built by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel in 1638 on the ridge at the confluence of the Phochu-Mochu and Dangchu rivers, went up in flames.

The fire is suspected to have started from a short circuit, but it is yet to be confirmed.

Although it drizzled, the fire continued to conflagrate, sending up thick black smoke and sparks, and filling the air with the smell of charred wood. All that could be heard was the roar of generators and fire brigade trucks that continued to douse the fire. It was as if the sleeping elephant that carried the fortress was standing up and shaking off the dzong it carried for centuries.

Wangduephodrang dzongda Lhendup Wangchhu was among the few, who managed to get inside the dzong, soon after the Bhutan Power corporation's manager informed him about the fire.

"When I reached there, there were already people battling the fire that had started from the ground floor of the administration block," the dzongda said.

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I saw history burn"

A Wangdue resident, in his blog



Photos: Rinzin Wangchuk, PHPA

Historic edifice reduced to ashes

1638

- Built by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel
- Wangduephodrang Dzong is the third oldest Dzong in Bhutan

1639

- Construction completed

1837

- Dzong destroyed by a major fire

1897

- Damaged by earthquake

2011

- Constructed separate living quarters for monks
- Minor damages by earthquake

2012

- Renovation began with GoI funding

Timeline: Wangduephodrang dzong



From Pg. 1

The dzongda injured his toe, when the heavy relic trunk they were trying to pick up and drop off the roof, hit his foot. "The doors were locked, and when we managed to break it open, the fire that was burning inside just got blown out towards us; a police personnel was hurt, I think," he said. "After that, there was no stopping the fire. Strong winds from the south was fanning it and, even with people, there was nothing we could do."

He said people inside the dzong were trying to create a fire-line to stop it from spreading towards the dratshang. "But there was no chance, because of the wind, and because there was no water, only a few hoses were working," he said. "We got the main statue of the Zhabdrung and lowered it down from the window, with the help of big ropes that were available from the scaffoldings," he said.

Bajo hospital's Dr Phuntsho Dorji said a rescue team member suffered smoke poisoning, but has now recovered.

The dzongda said they were in constant touch with the Zimpon's office, and got directives to at least save the

relics, even if nothing could be done about the fire. The relics, lying in the cacti, that, grows around the dzong, are to be collected this morning.

Home minister Minjur Dorji said it was a big loss for the country and the people of Sha Dagay. "The dzong's under renovation, with about 40 percent complete, but this is what I see here," he said looking at the remains of the dzong.

All that stood of the dzong that has three courtyards instead of one, were the blackened walls that supported the dzong for more than 300 years. The beams kept burning and falling off, but nothing could be done.

It is the third oldest dzong in the country after the Semtokha and Punakha dzongs, and played a significant role in Zhabdrung's efforts to unite the country.

One of the dzongkhag officials said he couldn't get inside at all. "It could have started between the administration block and the dratsang," he said. "The fire hose was also broken, and even the water from the brigade was blown off by the wind; so it was impossible."



Photo : PaSsu

Works and human settlement minister Yeshey Zimba, who rushed to the scene from Thimphu, said it was one of the country's biggest tragedies. "It's a serious and tragic loss of our ancient heritage, and it's a dzong that was founded by Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyel," he said. "All that we could do is feel sad and watch in despair, but we want to rebuild it to its former glory, and this could perhaps be an

indication."

The dzong has experienced disasters before. In 1837, the dzong was destroyed by a major fire and later rebuilt. During the time of Lam Neten Pelden Singye, the dzong was also damaged by a severe earthquake in 1897.

"I saw history burn," a Wangdue resident, who saw the dzong go up in flames, wrote in his blog.

His Majesty the King and

the fourth Druk Gyalpo rushed to the scene following news of the fire.

Numerous documents including those of the census, financial year closing cheques, lease agreements with Punatshangchhu projects and other pending land cases were all burnt.

Additional reporting
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