

Pakistan factory fires kill over 300 workers

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In Pakistan's worst ever industrial accident, at least 289 workers have died from a fire that erupted at a garment factory in Karachi on Tuesday evening.

Until late yesterday afternoon, firemen and rescue workers were removing bodies from what remained of the four-story undergarment and plastic utensils factory, which was situated in an industrial suburb of Pakistan's most populous city. Authorities called the death toll provisional, saying it is possible more bodies could yet be found and that some of the critically injured may not survive.

Most of the dead were asphyxiated by smoke because they could not escape the fire. Three of the building's four exits were locked, supposedly to prevent theft. The windows were grated, and the factory had no proper fire exits, contrary to regulations. The few it did have were clogged with supplies and garments.

Reuters cited one injured worker, 29-year-old Liaquat Hussain, as saying: "Within two minutes there was fire in the entire factory. The gate was closed. There was no access to get out, we were trapped inside."

"There was an immediate scramble for the exit," another worker told the media, "Some got crushed as there was just one way out and so many people."

Mohammad Pervez, a factory employee interviewed by Reuters while searching for his cousin, a co-worker at the plant, condemned the owners for being "more concerned with safeguarding the garments in the factory than the workers."

"If there were no metal grills on the windows a lot of people would have been saved," he added. "The factory was overflowing with garments and fabrics. Whoever complained was fired."

Many of the dozens of injured workers broke bones when they jumped from the factory roof or from holes that firemen and other emergency workers punctured in the factory's walls.

Earlier Tuesday about 25 workers were killed when a

fire erupted at a shoe factory in Lahore, Pakistan's second largest city and the capital of the Punjab. As in the Karachi fire, the factory, which was illegally built in a residential neighbourhood, lacked proper exits and fire-fighting equipment.

Electronic and print media images of the Karachi factory fire are harrowing. Trapped workers desperately pounded on the metal bars that barricade the factory's windows; anxious relatives clashed with baton-wielding police blocking them from entering the burning building; there were lines of white-sheet covered corpses, and distraught women holding up photos of missing husbands, brothers or sons.

The Karachi factory was owned by Ali Enterprises, a company with substantial exports to Europe and the US. It employed between 1,200 and 1,500 workers, who were reportedly paid the equivalent of US \$5 to \$6 per day. In violation of Pakistani labour law, Ali Enterprises had not registered a single one of these workers with the various meagre government-backed social insurance schemes, meaning the workers had no benefits.

According to the Pakistan News web site, the company had been pressing for increased production in recent weeks so as to be able to supply the Christmas market in the West without having recourse to costly air shipments. The web site also notes that Ali Enterprises' owner "was influential enough to keep authorities concerned silent over labour issues."

The cause of the fire has yet to be established, but reports suggest an electricity generator malfunctioned when a power outage ended.

The Lahore shoe factory fire erupted when an electricity outage caused workers to start a power generator. Sparks from the generator ignited chemicals used in the making of shoes.

Brownouts and electrical power outages are a daily occurrence in Pakistan.

Whatever the specific trigger of the Karachi fire, it resulted in an industrial slaughter for which the entire Pakistani establishment and the transnational corporations that scour the globe for cheap-labour production are responsible.

Garment exports from poor countries like Pakistan are a lucrative source of profits for major US and European retailers such as Tesco, Wal-Mart, Marks & Spencer, Kohl's, and Carrefour. These retail giants constantly pressure suppliers to slash costs through speedup and wage cuts.

Conditions at the Ali Enterprises are the norm in Pakistan and much of Asia. They were created through systematic non-enforcement of already woefully inadequate labour, environmental, and occupational health and safety regulations.

As a worker interviewed at the fire site told the Pakistan News, "I work in Noor Garments, a nearby factory, and as a general practice they lock us up inside rooms until our shift comes to an end. This is what happened here too."

Successive governments, whether led by Nawaz Sharif and his Pakistan Muslim League, the military, or the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), have given employers carte blanche, turning a blind eye to the violation of the most elementary norms and suppressing worker opposition.

With fierce global competition in the textile industry—Pakistan's largest industry, accounting for 7.5 of GDP and 56 percent of export earnings in 2011—Pakistan's politicians and state officials are determined to uphold sweatshop conditions akin to those that prevailed in Britain in the early decades of the 19th Century,

Shujah-ud-Din, a senior research officer at Pakistan Institute of Labour, Education and Research, told the media: "Inspection of industrial units by the provincial labour department was mandatory under the rules until 1997, when it was banned after demands by influential industrialists in the Sindh and Punjab provinces."

Although most factory fires are caused by short-circuits, inspection of factories' electrical equipment was also discontinued in Karachi and the Punjab in 2003, reports the *New York Times*. Speaking of the ban on such inspections, Wali Muhammad, a former electrical inspector, said, "This is criminal negligence."

A contributing factor in the Karachi fire disaster was

the dilapidated state of Pakistan's infrastructure. While successive Pakistani governments have been encouraged by Washington to lavish billions on the military, public services languish in disrepair. The fire-fighters attempting to put out the Ali Enterprises' factory fire lacked basic equipment and at one point ran out of water. Ultimately, they had to appeal to the Pakistan navy's fire-fighting unit for help.

On Wednesday, police said they were searching for the owner of the factory and his nephew, Ali Enterprise's CEO. Sindh Industries Minister Rauf Siddiqui has announced they are under investigation for criminal negligence. "We have ordered an inquiry into how the fire erupted and why proper emergency exits weren't provided," declared Siddiqui.

Unquestionably the owners and leading executives of Ali Enterprises warrant prosecution for their role in the factory carnage. However, the outrage of President Asif Ali Zardari and the entire Pakistani establishment—the Sindh government has issued an implausible order mandating the inspection of every factory in the province within 48 hours—is utterly feigned. It is the bluster of the culpable, seeking to cover up their responsibility for enforcing horrific exploitation on behalf of Pakistani big business and their ruthless transnational partners.



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