

Scores killed in Pakistani textile factory collapse in Lahore

Our correspondent
6 November 2015

At least 21 workers were killed and dozens were injured when a factory collapsed near Lahore, the capital of Pakistan's Punjab province on Wednesday afternoon. About 100 people had been rescued 17 hours after the collapse, but fears are increasing that the death toll will rise once the clearing of debris is completed: 150 to 200 were believed to be in the factory when it collapsed.

The collapsed Rajapur Polyester polythene bag factory was located in Sundar Industrial Estate, 45 kilometers from Lahore. About 500 factories are operating in this industrial estate.

Zia Ullah, the chief medical officer at Jinnah Hospital, told the media that some of the injured were brought to the hospital, suffering from head injuries and broken limbs.

Reuters reported that one trapped worker, Liaquat Ali, spoke to a television station through his mobile: "We were working on the first floor when the roof collapsed." Desperately hoping to survive, he added: "Now, I can hear the rumble of heavy machines which gives me hope that I will come out alive."

Mohammad Ramzan's 24-year-old son Amin, a daily wage worker in the factory, was also missing. He said: "We can't find him among the dead or the injured, so I am just hoping that he will be recovered from the rubble safely."

The factory's owner, Rana Ashraf, was adding a fourth floor to the three-storey building. Workers told the media that they saw cracks developing after a recent earthquake, but that the owner pressed ahead with the construction of the fourth storey anyway. Ashraf was among the dead.

"We told the owner to build additional pillars before beginning the fourth floor, but he took no notice of it," one worker said.

Muhammad Ramzan, a worker trapped in the rubble, told the media through his telephone: "The factory owner had an exchange of harsh words with the contractor who had advised him to stop the work due to cracks appearing after the earthquake."

A powerful, magnitude 7.5 earthquake occurred at the end of last month in the mountainous Hindu-Kush area where Pakistan, Afghanistan, China and Tajikistan meet. Around 380 were killed in Pakistan, while the death toll in Afghanistan was 115. In Pakistan, over 10,000 homes were damaged or destroyed, along with 147 schools.

Pakistan has a weak record of enforcing building codes and industrial safety laws. Many buildings there are at risk of collapse or serious damage in natural disasters like earthquakes and floods, as the drive to extract maximum profits leads businesses to ignore basic safety norms and endanger workers' lives.

In a clear indication of shoddy construction at Rajapur Polyester factory, no part of the four-storey building remains standing.

Shahbaz Sharif, Chief Minister of the Punjab Province and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's brother, announced half a million rupees for heirs of those who died in the tragedy. "We have ordered a complete investigation of the incident. After that, we'll know what caused this," he said.

Sharif said he had ordered a safety survey of buildings across Punjab, Pakistan's most populous province. Prime ministers of Pakistan and provincial chief ministers have made many such announcements after similar disasters in the past. However, safety code violations continue.

On September 4, the roof collapsed in a two-storey garment factory near Lahore, killing four workers and injuring 18. The factory roof was made of straw, and

the walls with mud and wooden pillars. Shahbaz Sharif called for a report, as usual.

In September 2012, the Ali Enterprise Factory near Karachi in Sindh Province caught on fire in the worst-ever industrial disaster in Pakistan, resulting in the deaths of nearly 300 workers. The building was a death trap for workers: it had no fire exits; windows were barred and stairways blocked; only one exit was open, and there were no fire safety measures. Those who jumped from the building to escape suffered severe injuries.

Although a murder case was registered against the factory owners, it has never come to the trial.

Family members of the fire victims gathered at the Karachi Press Club on September 27, three years after the tragedy, to protest broken promises and demand safety measures. One mother, Saeeda Khatoon, said: “It is not just a matter of money. Our aim is to strive for better conditions in factories to ensure that no mother should lose her son.”

Speakers at the gathering said all institutions connected to the safety of factories, industries and workplaces had failed to keep their promises. Sindh Chief Minister, Syed Quami Ali Shah had promised a plot of land and a government job for one member of each victim’s family, but families received nothing. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif promised 300,000 rupees as compensation but broke his promise.

There is no reason to believe that Pakistani authorities will treat Wednesday’s factory collapse with anything other than the usual contempt of the bourgeoisie for the lives of working people.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact