

Seven workers burned to death in Indian factory fire

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Seven workers were killed on Saturday night when a fire erupted at the Nandan Denim garment plant in Ahmedabad, in the western Indian state of Gujarat. The company, which employs over 4,500 workers, manufactures jeans and other denim products for major global retailers. The fire is the latest in a series of similar factory fires in recent months. Last December, 43 garment workers died in factory blaze in New Delhi.

Five workers' bodies—charred beyond recognition—were found after 55 fire fighters fought for 22 hours to extinguish the blaze in the two-storey building. Two more bodies were recovered from the debris on Sunday.

The deceased are Arvind Desai (36), Raunak Ben Rawal (38), Kunjalben Tiwari (45), Ganesh Patel (46), Lala Makwana (46), Govind Singh Kushwaha (22), and Sumitra Patel (47).

The distraught families of those killed were still waiting yesterday outside a hospital mortuary in Ahmedabad to take possession of their loved-ones' bodies. They were told they would have to wait until today and the completion of DNA tests. Mahesh Patel, a relative of one of the deceased, told the Associated Press (AP): "We can't even mourn our dead because we don't know which one is ours."

According to police and safety department officials, the fire started at around 6.30 p.m. in the factory's shirt department. More than 60 workers were on the first floor, resting after long shifts in the plant. While many were able to escape, several workers were trapped. Eyewitness said they could hear the workers screaming for help inside the factory.

Rajesh Bhatt, a senior fire official, told the AP that the building only had one door, which could only be reached by climbing a steep ladder. "There were hardly any means of escape from the blaze," he said.

While the cause of the fire is not yet known, it rapidly engulfed the factory, which was packed with highly flammable denim, fabric and textile dust. According to initial reports, there was no fire safety equipment, proper fire escapes or other basic emergency apparatus.

Preliminary police investigations have revealed that the factory violated multiple safety regulations. In other words, it was typical of the thousands of garment factories in Gujarat—and elsewhere in the country. India's state and central governments turn a blind-eye to these exploitative and dangerous conditions, while offering tax concessions and other generous profit-boosting benefits to national and international investors.

Nandan Denim is owned by the Chiripal Group—a highly profitable corporation involved in garments, textiles, dyeing and petrochemicals and which employs over 20,000 people. Gujarat state produces 65 percent of all denim in India and is the third largest denim manufacturer in the world.

To divert the anger of the surviving workers and outraged people, police arrested Chiripal Group managing director Jyoti Chiripal, chief executive officer Deepak Chiripal and four others. Local health and safety authorities have called for the company's license to be suspended. Nandan Denim, which last year earned \$US218 million, has agreed to pay the families of those killed a pittance of just \$14,000 each.

Survivors told AP about the harsh conditions they confront. The mainly women workers, who toil long hours, are only paid 35 US cents per hour. They have to stitch more than 400 pieces, forcing many of them "to work at a frantic pace."

One worker said: "We work almost 14 hours a day. But do we have an option? Every once in a while, there is a fire in some factory or the other. Nobody cares and

we keep on working.”

Nandan Denim exports to more than 20 countries, supplying global brands such as Target, Ann Taylor, Mango and Wrangler and giant retailers like Walmart and H&M, who all reap massive profits. As soon as news of the fire disaster hit the headlines, some of these retailers claimed that they did not purchase from Nandan Denim and washed their hands of any responsibility.

Neighbouring Bangladesh has experienced numerous factory fires and building collapses in recent years. In 2012, more than 112 garment workers were burned to death when a fire tore through the multi-floor Tazreen Fashion factory in the Ashulia district on Dhaka’s outskirts.

In 2013, the eight-storey Rana Plaza building near Dhaka, which housed five garment factories, collapsed. More than 1,200 people were killed, mainly garment workers, and thousands more were injured, in one of the world’s worst industrial disasters. Though cracks had been found in the building on previous day, the owners of the factories forced workers to attend the work next day regardless.



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