Police Probe Factory Owners after Fire

ADIL JAWAD,Associated Press

KARACHI, Pakistan (AP) — Pakistani police registered a murder case against the owners and managers of a garment factory in the southern city of Karachi after a fire swept through the building and killed 258 people, many of whom were unable to escape because the exit doors were locked, a senior police officer said Thursday.

The fire is being described as the deadliest industrial accident in Pakistan's 65-year history, and highlighted the woeful safety conditions that exist at many factories around the country. Buildings regularly lack fire exits and basic safety equipment like alarms and sprinklers — violations that are rarely punished by the government.

The fact that police registered a case against the three owners of the Karachi factory and the managers who worked there does not necessarily mean they will be charged with murder. Under Pakistani law, police must register a case as the first step in an investigation. They recommend whether charges should be made once the probe is complete.

Police are investigating the factory's owners and managers, who are still at large, because they did not follow basic safety regulations, said Amir Farooqi, a senior police officer in Karachi. Many of the exit doors were locked when the fire broke out Tuesday night, and escape routes were blocked with large bundles of cloth, he said.

Police are also investigating government officials who failed to enforce fire safety regulations.

The fire started when a boiler exploded and the flames ignited chemicals that were stored in the factory, which manufactured jeans and other clothes for export. Between 300 and 400 workers were inside when the blaze erupted.

"Hundreds saw hell on earth," said a banner headline across the top of Pakistan's leading English-language newspaper, Dawn, on Thursday.

Grieving relatives held scores of funerals across Karachi on Thursday. Many of the victims' bodies were recovered Wednesday once firefighters successfully put out the blaze and were able to enter parts of the factory that had been inaccessible, especially the basement, where many died of suffocation when it filled with smoke.

Mohammad Aamir lost his wife Perveen in the blaze. They were both working in the three-story factory, but on different floors. When the fire started, Aamir rushed up to the third floor to try to save his wife, who was working in the canteen. They tried to escape through an exit door to the roof, but it was locked.

"By the time the lock was broken, my wife died," said Aamir at Perveen's funeral. "Many workers jumped onto the adjacent building to save their lives. I also jumped and got injured."

The owners locked the exit doors in response to a recent theft, several victims' relatives have said.

Many of the building's windows were covered in metal bars, which made it even more difficult for workers to escape.

Mohammed Farhan was working on the second floor of the factory with dozens of other people when the fire broke out, filling the area with smoke. They had to use sewing machines to break through the metal bars on the windows, but many people collapsed before they succeeded.

"Everyone was shouting God is great when we were trying to break the windows," said Farhan, who eventually jumped out and suffered minor injuries.

Also Tuesday night, a fire broke out at a shoe factory in the eastern city of Lahore, killing 25 people. The fire started when workers tried to start a generator after the electricity went out, and sparks ignited chemicals used to make shoes. The blaze blocked the only exit, and firefighters had to break through the building's walls to save people.

"The tragedy that began to unfold on Tuesday has taken the entire country in an asphyxiating grip of grief mixed with rage," said an editorial in Dawn, the newspaper. "Questions, though belated, are being asked about the non-implementation of safety standards and the massive corruption in government ranks which led to such flagrant violations of the law."

Also Thursday, gunmen killed 10 road construction workers in southwest Pakistan, said Javed Ahmad, a local government official. The incident took place in Mastung

district in Baluchistan province.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack on the workers, who were employed by the government.

Baluchistan is home to both Islamist militants and separatists who have waged a violent insurgency against the government for decades over greater autonomy and a larger share of the province's natural resources.

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