Bangladesh Probe: Fire Sabotage, Owner Negligent

JULHAS ALAM,Associated Press

DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) — A Bangladesh government committee investigating the garment factory fire that killed 112 people last month said in its findings that the blaze was sabotage, probably by someone who worked there.

But the panel said that no matter who set the fire, the owner of the factory also should be punished for the deaths because he neglected worker safety.

"If someone is responsible for such a huge number of deaths, that's him. He has failed to ensure safety," committee head Mainuddin Khandaker said of factory owner Delwar Hossain.

Some government and garment industry officials had alleged soon after the Nov. 24 fire that it was an act of sabotage, though a fire official said casualties would have been greatly reduced if the factory had followed safety rules.

The factory lacked emergency exits and Hossain has said only three floors of the eight-story building were legally built. Surviving employees said gates had been locked and managers had told them to go back to work after the fire alarm went off.

The four-member committee submitted its report to the government Monday. At least two other investigations are continuing.

Khandaker, an official with the Ministry of Home Affairs, told The Associated Press that committee members believe some people who worked at the factory were involved in the sabotage.

"Otherwise, how come they locked the gates? How come they asked the workers to go back to work even after the fire alarm?" he said.

Three factory officials suspected of locking workers inside the building were arrested days after the fire and remain in custody.

Khandaker said the panel recommended further investigation through a "powerful intelligence agency" to unearth the insiders.

No matter who is responsible for setting the fire, Khandaker said, "We can't spare the owner of the factory. He is responsible for his failure to ensure safety. I have recommended specifically to bring the owner under the purview of law."

Hossain "tried to defend himself" under questioning from the committee, Khandaker said. "But I can tell you clearly that he had serious negligence as he has failed to

follow existing building code and safety rules."

A phone call seeking comment from Hossain rang unanswered Monday night.

The committee recommended that the government form a "powerful task force" to ensure safety at garment factories across the country. The garment industry accounts for about 80 percent of Bangladesh's exports, and workers' rights groups say existing regulations have gone unenforced because officials fear the industry's power.

The Tazreen Fashions Ltd. factory made clothing for several major U.S. retailers, including Wal-Mart, which had received a 2011 audit warning about the factory's conditions. Wal-Mart and other companies said suppliers had used the Tazreen factory without their knowledge.

Retailers, fashion labels, labor groups and local officials meeting in 2011 in Dhaka, the capital, had discussed an agreement to improve fire safety at Bangladesh's roughly 4,000 garment factories. The proposal went nowhere after a Wal-Mart representative said it was "not financially feasible," according to meeting minutes and witnesses.

Khandaker said the government would now examine his committee's report and take further steps in line with their recommendations.

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