

## Investigators: Factory fire victims were trapped behind locked doors - CNN.com

By Shaan Khan, CNN

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Islamabad, Pakistan (CNN) -- During a factory fire that left more than 250 people dead in Karachi, one of the workers, Abdul Ghani, struggled to find his wife, who also worked there.

"I remember thinking if I can't save her, I hope I burn to death with her," Ghani said.

The father of two young daughters, Ghani described in terrifying detail his account of what happened when a fire broke out at the denim factory where he worked on September 11.

"The fire was so intense I couldn't get in," he said.

While firefighters struggled to control the flames, family members took matters into their own hands and tried entering the burning building to save their loved ones.



Pakistan factory fire kills hundreds



Workplace safety at issue in Pakistan

"We broke the wall down and found bodies melted onto each other... piled up and completely burnt," Ghani said.

His wife died in the factory fire.



Fatalities in Pakistan factory collapse

Several trapped workers jumped from the upper floors to escape the flames, said Mustafa Jamal, a senior government official who was at the scene.

Pakistani investigators say most of the victims were trapped behind locked emergency exits -- which is a serious violation of worker safety laws. The company denies the doors were locked and blames a late response by firefighters, who, along with witnesses, say they arrived within minutes.

RINA group-- an Italian company that inspected factories on behalf of an international watchdog group-- confirmed that the factory owned by Ali Enterprises had passed inspection on August 20, a few weeks before the fire.

Its audit report said, "Access to fire extinguishers and passages leading to exits was maintained free from any kind of obstruction. Primary exits and emergency exits are kept unlocked while employees are inside facility."

After the fire, RINA issued a statement on its web site expressing sympathy for the victims and noted that "the certification body is not in a position to verify the day-by-day implementation of the system." The statment also said, "RINA has decided, as a precautionary measure, to voluntarily suspend new certification activities in Pakistan." It has pledged to conduct an internal investigation.

While some 70 bodies have yet to be identified, criminal proceedings against the factory owners will begin as late as next year, said Faisal Siddiqi, the victims' lawyer.

Police officials said the owner of the factory was released due to his deteriorating health, but his two sons Shahid Bhaila and Arshad Bhaila who were involved in the day-to-day function of the factory are being held in jail and could face murder charges.

CNN tried to reach the defendants' lawyer several times, but he was unavailable for comment.

The provincial government has pledged to compensate the families of the victims, but Ghani said he has yet to see any kind of support.

Arif Elahi, the Secretary of Labor, said, so far, more than 173 victims' families have been compensated with up to \$9,000 by different government agencies.

"We are still identifying some of the bodies," Elahi said. "As soon as we know who they are, we will compensate the rest of the families."

Siddiqi, the legal counsel for the victims, said that they've "asked the government for a comprehensive inspection of all factories, details of transparent compensation for the victims' families and an independent judicial commission that will investigate the fire."

Both a police investigation and a government inquiry into the fire have been completed and are expected to be submitted shortly.

The fire is believed to be the worst manmade disaster in Pakistan's history, according to the National Disaster Management Authority.

The fire raises new questions about possible lapses in safety measures and the enforcement of factory fire codes in Karachi's booming industrial sector, said Siddiqi.

"It is only a matter of time that something like this could happen again," he said.

Pakistan has one of the largest textile industries in the world, shipping \$13.8 billion worth of textiles mostly to the U.S. and Europe this year. Textiles account for 63 percent of Pakistan's exports.

The tragedy in Karachi has forced factory owners to re-evaluate the enforcement of labor laws in their own factories, an owner of a factory told CNN.

"I wish that this kind of tragedy never happens to anyone else," said Ghani, who lost his wife in the fire.

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