

# NEWSCLIPPINGS

***JULY TO DECEMBER 2019***

## HUTS ON FIRE



## Urban Resource Centre

A-2, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, Westland Trade Centre, Block 7&8, C-5, Shaheed-e-Millat Road, Karachi.  
Tel: 021-4559317, Fax: 021-4387692, Email: [urc@cyber.net.pk](mailto:urc@cyber.net.pk), Website: [www.urckarachi.org](http://www.urckarachi.org)  
Facebook: [www.facebook.com/URCKHI](https://www.facebook.com/URCKHI) Twitter: [https://twitter.com/urc\\_karachi](https://twitter.com/urc_karachi)

### **Daylong effort to control SITE factory fire yet to succeed**

A huge fire that broke out in a garments factory in the SITE area on Sunday morning could not be brought under control till late in the evening by over a dozen fire engines as firemen faced immense hardships in reaching the place where the blaze had erupted due to lack of proper access and filling of smoke in the building, officials said. No one was hurt in the incident.

At 10pm, fire brigade official said: "Still, 11 fire engines are trying to control the fire but so far, we have not received any information that the fire has been controlled".

KMC's fire brigade official said that they received information about the fire inside the textile mill at around 9:54am on Sunday.

Initially, a few fire engines were sent to control the fire but after realising gravity of the situation, fire engines were called from across the metropolis while Pakistan Navy's fire engines also joined in.

"As many as 12 fire tenders of the KMC, around 25 water bowsers of the KWSB, apart from the Navy fire tenders, continued their efforts for several hours but the fire could not be brought under control," said a fireman.

He added that the warehouse, located on the first floor of the two-storey building was huge, was almost full of rejected clothes, which were kept in a haphazard manner.

(By The Newspaper's Staff Reporter Dawn, 13, 15/07/2019)

### **Garment factory in SITE Area goes up in flames**

A garment factory, Fair Deal Textile, located in SITE Area, caught fire early on Sunday morning. The blaze that spread rapidly through the factory's building couldn't be controlled even six hours since after it erupted.

On being informed of the incident, two fire tenders immediately reached the spot, but soon more had to be sought as those present on the site failed to control the flames. Smoke from the fire and strong winds made it further difficult for fire brigade officials to put out the blaze.

Deputy Chief Fire Officer Imtiaz Ahmed explained that due to power suspension, exhaust fans in the factory were not working, which had resulted in the accumulation of smoke inside the factory's building, making it difficult for fire fighters to control the fire.

He said that factory's building covers a large area and different parts of its building were on fire. Fire fighters attempted to control the flames by breaking the walls of the factory at eight selected spots, he added. Ahmed further said that the factory's grey department, located on the first floor of the building, had also caught fire but the flames were concealed behind the heavy machinery and cloth piles kept in the department.

Besides fire brigade vehicles, water tankers, two fire tenders of Pakistan Navy, 12 other fire tenders and 20 water bowsers also reached the site to assist with extinguishing the fire.

Karachi Water and Sewerage Board (KWSB) Managing Director Asadullah Khan said that emergency was declared at Sakhi Hasan and Nipa hydrants in light of the incident and water tankers were sent to the fire site to assist in controlling the fire. According to Khan, water tankers containing around 100,000 gallons of water had been sent to the fire site initially and KWSB officials were in constant contact with the fire brigade officials to stay up to date about the progress of the operation.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf leader, Khurram Sher Zaman, also visited the site of the factory and pointed out that fire fighters were facing difficulties in dousing the fire due to the unavailability of masks. He said that fire fighters have not been provided proper uniforms, shoes and paraphernalia to extinguish the fire and criticised the Sindh government for this negligence, calling it "incapable."

He said that there have been several similar incidents of fire in the past, where flames engulfed factories for several hours and only died down after the structure was burnt to ashes.

According to fire brigade officials, the reason behind the fire couldn't be determined immediately.

(By Our Correspondent The Express Tribune, 04, 15/07/2019)

### **Six used clothes warehouses gutted in Shershah fire**

A huge fire destroyed six warehouses in Shershah on Saturday, said officials.

The blaze which erupted in morning could not be controlled till evening.

According to Karachi Metropolitan Corporation fire brigade officials, they received information at around 9.42am about the fire in six warehouses in Shershah, where mostly old clothes were kept.

Initially, a few fire engines were sent, but after realising the gravity of the situation, more fire engines were called from other areas while Pakistan Navy fire engines also joined the KMC in firefighting efforts.

The officials said nine engines of the KMC and 10 water bowsers belonging to the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board were busy in controlling the fire.

Shershah SHO Inam Hasan Junejo said that four warehouses were completely destroyed in the fire.

However, efforts were under way to save the two remaining warehouses from complete destruction.

The area SHO believed that short circuit might have set off the fire.

The exact estimation of loss could not be made immediately.

Chief Minister of Sindh Murad Ali Shah took notice of the incident and directed the commissioner of Karachi to exercise all resources for extinguishing the fire to prevent any major damage.

Mr Shah also asked the commissioner to seek help from other institutions if needed.

Separately, Local Government Minister Saeed Ghani also took notice of the incident and directed the managing director of the KWSB to provide uninterrupted water supply immediately.

Mr Ghani said that at least nine fire engines were busy in controlling the fire while 10 water bowsers of the KWSB were providing water.

He said more water tankers were being sent.

"Since fire has erupted in six warehouses dealing with old clothes, the firemen are facing difficulties, but despite this, the fire brigade staff is taking all possible efforts to extinguish the fire," observed the minister.  
(By The Newspaper's Staff Reporter Dawn, 15, 28/07/2019)

### **Little progress as Baldia factory fire case enters 7th year**

The police and Rangers have failed to bring back to Pakistan the fleeing owners of the Baldia factory and the alleged mastermind of the deadly fire that killed some 260 workers though the trial has entered its seventh year, it emerged on Wednesday.

More than 260 workers were burnt alive in the multistorey building of the Ali Enterprises garment factory on Sept 11, 2012.

Seventeen charred bodies recovered from the burnt industrial unit are still unidentified.

*ATC bound to decide a case within seven days*

Nine accused — including Muttahida Qaumi Movement lawmaker and then provincial minister for commerce and industries Rauf Siddiqui, then MQM sector-in-charge Abdul Rehman, alias Bhola; Zubair, alias Chariya — have been charged with allegedly setting ablaze the ill-fated industrial unit with the help of its four gatekeepers — Shahrukh, Fazal Ahmed, Arshad Mehmood and Ali Mohammad.

The prosecution alleged that they acted on the instruction of the then head of the MQM's Karachi Tanzeemi Committee, Hammad Siddiqui, as the factory owners failed to pay Rs250 million protection money and partnership in the business.

Hyderabad-based business persons — Umar Hasan Qadri, Ali Hasan Qadri, Dr Abdul Sattar Khan and Iqbal Adeeb Khanum — have been booked for purportedly using Rs50.9m allegedly extorted from the factory owners on the pretext of compensation for the victims.

The antiterrorism court-VII judge, who is conducting the trial at the judicial complex inside the central prison, had framed the charges of terrorism, extortion and arson on the accused persons on Feb 14, 2018. But they pleaded not guilty and opted to contest the case.

"Currently, two accused persons — Bhola and Chariya — are in jail," Advocate Sajid Mehboob Sheikh, special public prosecutor representing the Rangers which became the prosecuting agency in the case after the charges of terrorism, extortion and murder were added, told Dawn.

Seven other accused persons, including Rauf Siddiqui, the Hyderabad-based business persons and the four gatekeepers of Ali Enterprises, are on bail, he added.

The judicial and prosecution sources said Hammad Siddiqui, the alleged mastermind, and Ali Hasan Qadri had been declared proclaimed offenders in the present case.

#### **No follow-up to Hammad's arrest in Dubai**

"Hammad is still out of the country," the prosecution sources explained, adding that the media reports regarding his arrest in Dubai through Interpol "could not be confirmed" due to which the process to bring him back to the country was not initiated.

"Qadri went to America for cancer treatment after obtaining bail from the trial court and he is said to be unable to travel back due to his worsening health condition," they added.

Initially, owner of the factory Abdul Aziz Bhaila and his two sons, Arshad Bhaila and Shahid Bhaila, a general manager and four gatekeepers were charge-sheeted by the police for allegedly committing premeditated murder and 'negligence' to the workers' safety.

However, the case took a new turn in February 2015 when Pakistan Rangers, Sindh, submitted a joint investigation team (JIT) report in the Sindh High Court (SHC), which revealed that the factory was set on fire after its owners failed to pay 'protection money'.

Subsequently, the reinvestigation of the case was ordered in March 2015 through a JIT. In the meantime, the SHC directed the ATC to expedite the trial and submit a progress report on every hearing.

"Earlier, the police had almost buried the case due to political exigencies," the paramilitary force's prosecutor said, adding that the matter was being used as a political tool between the then ruling political parties.

#### **ATC bound to decide a case within seven days**

An antiterrorism court is legally bound to decide a case within seven days after indictment, according to Section 19(7) of the Anti-Terrorism Act.

However, after a lengthy reinvestigation, the police filed a supplementary investigation report in August 2016 in which they only charge-sheeted Hammad Siddiqui, Bhola and their three to four unknown accomplices and did not send the 13 other suspects, including those proposed by the JIT, for trial.

But the court had put all discharged men in the list of the accused by observing that the owners/manager had ordered the closure of the gates while others abetted the crime one way or another by extorting money on the pretext of distributing it among the victim families.

Later, the court recalled its order regarding the inclusion of the owners as accused as the prosecution said they were the key witnesses in the case.

The prosecution listed 768 witnesses in the supplementary charge sheet.

"Six witnesses, four doctors and two police officials, have died a natural death during this period," the prosecution and judicial sources told Dawn.

The remaining witnesses included over 300 private persons, 259 legal heirs of the victims and 56 survivors.

The Rangers prosecutor said that they gave up 364 witnesses being "unnecessarily" listed in the present case.

"So far, the testimonies of 396 witnesses have been recorded," he said, adding that they included the eyewitnesses, legal heirs, the injured, chemical examiners and forensic experts.

The prosecution claimed that seven witnesses — factory owners Arshad Bhaila and Shahid Bhaila, three police investigating officers and two chemical and ballistics experts of the army — are left to be examined now.

"We are preparing to get the statements of the factory owners — Arshad Bhaila and Shahid Bhaila — recorded through video-conferencing system from the Pakistan consulate in Dubai, United Arab Emirates," said prosecutor Mehboob on whose request the trial court had last month directed the federal government to ensure that necessary arrangements were made at the foreign mission's office in the Gulf state.

The Bhaila brothers with their father, Abdul Aziz Bhaila, were initially booked and arrested in a case pertaining to allegedly committing premeditated murder and negligence towards the workers' safety at the workplace, etc.

In February 2013, they were granted bail by the Sindh High Court as the IO recommended dropping the charge of premeditated murder in the case. However, after obtaining post-arrest bail, they fled the country citing alleged death threats. In 2015, a joint investigation team probing the case met them in Dubai and recorded their statements.

On the last hearing, the trial court deferred recording their testimonies through video link after accused Rehman, alias Bhola, challenged such a move in the SHC, which is yet to rule on the matter.  
(By Naeem Sahoutara Dawn, 15, 12/09/2019)

### **Baldia factory fire: Owner narrates a harrowing tale of extortion, greed and carnage**

For the past seven years, the Baldia factory fire incident has remained etched in the collective memory of Karachi's citizens as a brutal example of the callousness of industrialists and the sheer disregard for labour rights and safety protocols.

The screams of the over 250 people, who were burned alive, and the wails of their families for justice may echo for times to come, but the harrowing details uncovered during the hearings of the case in the anti-terrorism court tell a story of sheer brutality, greed and criminal enterprise, involving people from the top tier of government to the militant wing of a political party that had the city in a literal chokehold through its network of henchmen and hit men.

On Thursday, the factory owner, Arshad Bhaila, recorded his statement via video link from the Pakistani embassy in Dubai. Addressing the ATC-VII via Skype, Bhaila revealed alarming details of a nexus between the then Sindh governor Ishratul Ebad Khan, former Citizens Police Liaison Committee chief Ahmed Chinoy and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) leadership.



#### **Beginning of the end**

According to Bhaila, it all started when they appointed a man identified as Mansoor as the factory manager in 2004. That same year, they started paying extortion to the MQM, he told the court, adding that the amount given to the MQM varied between Rs1.5 million to Rs2.5 million per month. Bhaila said that Mansoor had settled the amount with the MQM and had justified to the owners that they had to keep the party satisfied if they wished to operate in Karachi. It was Mansoor who used to transfer the money to the MQM, said Bhaila.

In 2012, Bhaila was informed that Rehman Bhola had demanded Rs250 million on the orders of MQM's coordination committee chief, Hammad Siddiqi. "I asked Mansoor to settle the issue by paying Rs10 million, but Rehman Bhola insisted we pay the Rs250 million or take the MQM as partners," Bhaila told the court.

It was at this point that Bhaila thought of shifting the factory to Bangladesh. "It was the first time in my life that I visited Bangladesh with my brother and Mansoor and stayed there for three months," he told the court.

Back in Pakistan, Bhaila recalled, he was leaving the factory premises on the evening of September 11, 2012, when the accountant had informed him that a fire had erupted in the factory. "I had never seen a fire of this magnitude in my life," said Bhaila. He called the fire department and his relatives. The fire department staff reached the site after almost an hour but they didn't have the equipment or water to extinguish the blaze, he recalled. "I offered the fire department staff to use the water from the factory's hydrant but they refused it. They said 'let us do our job'," he told the court.

Meanwhile, as the factory burned, Bhaila said he was informed that Zubair Charya was casually sitting in the canteen with his friends, who did not even work at the site.

#### **The aftermath**

In the aftermath of the blaze which claimed the lives of over 250 workers, Bhaila said that they requested the commission to conduct a forensic analysis and that they would be willing to pay the expenses for it, but the request was rejected. "We kept providing rations and financial assistance to the affected families for three years," he told the court.

Meanwhile, the Bhailas sought the services of Advocate Naimatullah Randhawa for the case. The advocate appeared in a few hearings but he was also murdered some time after.

In 2013, the owners' uncle was kidnapped from SITE Area and was kept detained for 70 days. "Former CPLC chief Ahmed Chinoy was looking into this matter himself and he told us to settle the affairs with the kidnappers," said Bhaila. His uncle was released on the payment of a heavy amount in ransom.

Until this point, the Bhailas were living in Karachi. In 2015, however, after the Rangers submitted the JIT report in the Sindh High Court, which established foul play and arson in the incident, the Bhailas decided to move to Dubai with their families.

On September 13, Chinoy, who was still the CPLC chief, contacted the Bhailas through their relatives, advising them to hand themselves over to the police at the Governor's House. "The message was sent from the Governor's House through Ahmed Chinoy," Bhaila told the court.

When they finally managed to secure bail, the MQM started pressurising them again. "We decided to settle the affairs through the MQM," said Bhaila, adding that they transferred Rs59.8 million in the account number provided by a man identified as Ali Qadri.

When they asked Qadri about the date for the distribution of funds among the affected families, there was no response. Yet again, then Governor Ishratul Ebad sent a message through Chinoy, directing them to pay Rs500,000 through the MQM's platform to each of the victims' families if they wanted the issue to subside. Meanwhile, former MNA Salman Mujahid Baloch had met the Bhailas in prison and advised them to hire him as their counsel.

#### **Hit men inside**

During the hearing, Bhaila also revealed that Mansoor had appointed Zubair Charya in the finishing department of the factory in 2005. Charya was a close friend of Majid Baig, a younger brother of MQM's Baldia Town sector in-charge Asghar Baig. At this point, the manager, Mansoor, was paying Rs1.5 million per month to the MQM.

In the beginning of 2012, Arshad Bhaila's brother, Shahid, met sector in-charge Asghar Baig in Mansoor's office. The sector in-charge told him that they would have to increase the extortion amount manifold. On July 12, 2012, Rehman Bhola replaced Asghar Baig as the sector in-charge of Baldia Town. "One day, when we were leaving the factory, Rehman Bhola stopped us and threatened us to pay Rs250 million and contact Hammad Siddiqi," Bhaila told the court. "We kept using alternative routes and switching cars to visit the factory," he added.

Hours after the factory was set on fire, Chinoy sent a message to the Bhailas through their relatives that it wasn't safe for them to stay in their homes or visit the factory. "MQM workers took the control of the factory after we left and didn't let anyone in," Bhaila recalled. "Our names were included in ECL within 24 hours," he added.

A case was filed against the Bhailas and they were presented as the real culprits. "We acquired bail through a Larkana court and became part of the police investigation," said Bhaila.

#### Identification parade

After the statement, an identification parade was also carried out through Skype on the court's orders. Arshad Baila identified all the accused, including Rehman Bhola, Zubair Charya and others, with the exception of two accused. When asked how he knew Rauf Siddiqui, Bhaila said he knew of him through the media.

The counsels of the accused completed the cross-questioning over the witness' statement.

The court summoned the IO of the case, SSP Sajid Sadozai, for his statement at the next hearing and adjourned the hearing till September 21.

(By Nasir Butt The Express Tribune, 04, 20/09/2019)

### Owner names MQM lawmaker, six others in Baldia factory fire case

Seven years after the deadly fire that killed more than 250 workers in a Baldia garment factory, an owner of the industrial unit identified a Muttahida Qaumi Movement lawmaker and six others as accused persons, who allegedly planned and set fire to their business over non-payment of 'protection money'.



While recording his statement from the Pakistan consulate in Dubai through a video link, Arshad Bhaila deposed before an antiterrorism court that the fire in their factory in which over 250 workers perished was an act of terrorism intentionally carried out by the accused persons on the instructions of the MQM leadership.

In July, the trial court had allowed an application moved by Arshad Bhaila and Shahid Bhaila through their counsel Afaq Ahmed pleading to the court to record their testimonies from the Gulf state through a video link citing purported threats to their lives in the country.

*Says Hammad Siddiqui had asked them to pay Rs250m and 50pc 'share' in the factory*

On Thursday, the ATC-VII judge, who is conducting trial in the judicial complex inside the central prison, took up the matter to record their statements, when the special public prosecutor moved an application stating that the prosecution had given up witness Shahid and sought to record the statement of his brother Arshad.

Two detained accused — then sector in-charge Abdul Rehman, alias Bhola, and M. Zubair, alias Chariya — were produced from prison. The MQM lawmaker, the then provincial minister for industries, Rauf Siddiqui, gatekeepers of the factory Shahruxh Latif, Fazal Ahmed, Arshad Mehmood and Ali Mohammad appeared on bail.

Hyderabad-based business persons — Ali Hasan Qadri and Dr Abdul Sattar Khan — who have been booked for purportedly using Rs50.9m allegedly extorted from the factory owners on the pretext of compensation for the victims, also appeared on bail.

At the outset, the judge put the accused persons before witness Arshad Bhaila for the purpose of identification through the video link.

The witness rightly picked out Abdul Rehman Bhola, Zubair Chariya and the four factory gatekeepers as the accused persons. However, Mr Bhaila deposed that he had seen Rauf Siddiqui through the media, but neither had met him nor Qadri or Dr Abdul Sattar.

#### Regular 'protection money'

The factory owner deposed that they had been paying 'protection money' to the MQM every month, adding that they inducted Mansoor Ahmed as the production manager in the factory, who had connections with the political party.

Mansoor Ahmed told the party that the factory owners would pay it Rs1.5m monthly, he added.

The witness further deposed that in 2005 the production manager inducted Zubair Ahmed in the factory's finishing department, who was a friend of Majid Baig, the younger brother of then sector in-charge Asghar Baig of the MQM in Baldia Town.

The owner deposed that in 2012 the manager told him that they would have to pay more protection money and arranged a meeting with Asghar Baig, who told them that from then they would have to pay an increased amount of protection money to the MQM. He said on July 12, 2012 Abdul Rehman, alias Bhola, replaced Asghar Baig as sector in-charge in Baldia.

The factory owner mentioned that as they were leaving their factory one day Abdul Rehman intercepted them and threatened to contact the then MQM Karachi Tanzeemi Committee head Hammad Siddiqui over the matter of protection money.

He deposed that later Bhola told them that Siddiqui had asked them to pay Rs250m and 50 per cent share in the factory.

"This stunned us," the witness deposed, adding that subsequently he asked their manager Mansoor Ahmed to offer to settle the matter against a payment of Rs10m on their behalf.

The factory owner further deposed that due to repeated demands for money by the MQM, they decided to shift their business to Bangladesh and also visited that country in this regard.

He added that the people from the MQM started to vex them regularly due to which they even used to change their routes and vehicles while visiting their factory.

Mr Bhaila recalled that on Sept 11, 2012 a fire first broke out in the basement of the factory and then on the upper floor of the building, but nothing happened on the mezzanine floor.

He said that the fire brigade staff arrived there after a delay of 60 to 90 minutes.

The witness deposed that after the fire engulfed the factory, then head of the Citizens-Police Liaison Committee (CPLC) Ahmed Chinoy sent a message to them through a relative that "it was not safe for them to stay at the burning factory". Therefore, the owner said they went to a relative's place.

The factory owner testified that soon after they left the scene, MQM workers took over the place and they did not let anyone to go inside the factory. He said within 24 hours of the incident their names were placed on the Exit Control List.

Bhaila said later a factory worker, Kashif, told them that Zubair Chariya and five unknown men were seen smoking hashish in the factory's canteen when the fire broke out. According to Kashif, Zubair was involved in setting fire to the industrial unit, he added. The factory owner also deposed that the police registered an FIR of the incident against them (factory owners) under pressure from then provincial minister for industries Rauf Siddiqui and the MQM leadership. "We were portrayed as villains and the real culprit was shown as a hero," he added.

Arshad Bhaila said they obtained pre-arrest bail from the Sindh High Court's circuit bench in Larkana and joined the investigation. The witness said they had engaged Advocate Naimat Randhawa, who was also killed after he appeared in the court on their behalf on some dates of hearing.

(By Naeem Sahoutara Dawn, 20/09/2019)

### **Fire erupts in Saddar building**

A fire broke out in a godown situated in an old building in the busy Saddar area on Thursday afternoon, according to officials.

They added that the blaze erupted in the godown located on the third floor of a building at Regal Chowk and destroyed goods.

Fire Brigade officials said they received information about the incident at around 2.42pm. After hectic efforts, three fire tenders and one snorkel managed to control the fire lasting for over three hours. However, cooling work continued till night, he said.

The cause of the fire and estimation of loss could not be made immediately.

Preedy SHO Rana Amjad Anwar said loudspeakers were kept at the godown in a flat, which were destroyed. The owner told the police that they were estimating the financial loss.

The officer said that one family residing in the building was rescued as they faced breathing problems. He revealed that mostly the godowns were used for electronic items.

(By Newspaper's Staff Reporter Dawn, 16, 06/12/2019)