

# NEWSCLIPPINGS

JANUARY TO JUNE 2017

## URBAN SERVICES



## Urban Resource Centre

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## Hung out to dry: No funds, equipment for Sindh's civil defence

The department responsible for assisting the armed forces during times of war or emergency and for the inspection of fire safety of all buildings in Sindh does not even have a photostat machine of its own.



According to the Schedule for New Expenditure by the civil defence department sent to the Sindh government – a copy of which is available with The Express Tribune – the existing photostat machine is out of order and not repairable.

“The photostat machine is one part of running routine official business. So this directorate of civil defence requires one photostat machine on a priority basis,” reads the letter.



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The story does not end here. After the deadly Regent Plaza fire, the question sprung up about whose responsibility it was to inspect the four-star hotel. Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah called a meeting in which he was informed about the civil defence department and its deteriorating condition through a presentation.

### What is civil defence?

According to the presentation, the civil defence is a government organisation created to meet all disasters, whether caused by enemies or by natural disasters. The term disaster refers to any kind of incident which disrupts people's lives and as a result they need protection, food, clothing, shelter, medical and social care and other necessities of life.



The basic functions of this department are to establish, recruit and train warden service organisations, to assist the armed forces during times of war or declared emergency and to provide timely air raid warnings.

The department's basic training includes awareness regarding fire fighting, casualty services, rescue services, warden services and air raid courses.

Training is given to government and semi-government employees, including employees of industrial and commercial units, vital installations, students and teachers of schools, colleges and universities.

### Baldia factory fire case: Jail notified to carry out trial inside prison

“Had the department been giving training incidents like the Regent Plaza or Baldia Town fires wouldn't have been so deadly,” said an official of the department on the condition of anonymity.



The department, the official explained, works under the federal as well as the provincial government's home ministry. The training schools, he said are under the federal government, whereas the inspection of buildings is a provincial subject, according to the Civil Defence Act, 1952.

The district's deputy commissioner is the controller of the civil defence in that particular district under whom the deputy controller of the civil defence works, according to the official, and by law they are supposed to inspect all construction in their districts for fire safety measures.

### In a sorry state

On paper, the working strength of the department in Sindh is 293, said the official, out of which 147 are incumbent, while the other 146 posts lying vacant. The Sindh government isn't paying any attention to the matter, he said.

In Karachi's districts Malir and Korangi the department, its staff and its building have ceased to exist. Districts Sajawal, Sanghar, Ghotki and Shikarpur are also in need of office buildings and staff. Even in Karachi's districts Central and East the deputy controllers' posts are vacant.

Apart from this, the department has no rescue vehicles, ambulances, fire tenders or training equipment. There are not funds for an honorarium for volunteers ready to work with them.

“At times we have to replace our uniforms ourselves as the department has no funds available with it,” lamented the official, asking how on the earth one could inspect huge buildings in Sindh without any equipment for inspection.

According to the Schedule for New Expenditure prepared by the department, the four districts of the port city where they have offices are in need of stationary worth Rs80,000 each.

The department has requested Rs100,000 funds for uniforms and protective clothing for each district. The same is the case for the rest of Sindh.

### **11 killed, 75 injured as fire erupts at Karachi’s Regent Plaza Hotel**

The department has requested two computers, as the existing stock that were purchased in 2007 have gone out of order, two multimedia projectors – a complete set and one laptop latest model – as one of the responsibilities of the department is to arrange training programmes and activities.

“The existing multimedia projector was procured in 2007 and is being used for training purposes but is insufficient as many training sessions can run at the same time or at different places,” the letter reads.

The allocated budget, according to the document, for the fiscal year 2015-16 was Rs16,661,500.

In the 2014-15’s budget, the funds were not released and this year’s estimated budget is Rs113,592,000 and several of the items that have been approved, such as multimedia projectors and computers, have not been given to the department yet, claimed the official.

(By Oonib Azam The Express Tribune 13, 21/02/2017)

## **Wither fire safety: Karachi at mercy of an ill-resourced emergency response system**

In case of a deadly blaze, Karachi, a city of 22 million people, will be at the mercy of an ill-resourced emergency response system, an apathetic building control authority and an incapable Civil Defence department.

Regent Plaza hotel’s deadly blaze followed a huge fire that gutted a warehouse in SITE area last week and another in Gulshan-e-Iqbal on Tuesday, yet again laid bare the plight of Karachi’s ability to fight the fire. What emerged during these recent incidents in the city is that there isn’t any one department to look after fire-related incidents.

### **Fire regulations**

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According to fire laws expert Shariq Ali, these laws are in bits and pieces. The passive fire laws, he said, are to be looked after by the Sindh Building Control Authority (SBCA) while any building is under construction. The laws are provided under the SBCA’s Karachi Building and Town Planning Regulations, 2002.

Also, he said, the fire department of the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC) has to certify the buildings’ fire safety precautions. Meanwhile, the Civil Defence department has to conduct inspections regularly.

### **KMC receives two fire trucks from Japan**

None of these departments are abiding by their own bylaws or even coordinating with each other leaving the citizens out on a limb.

### **Stand pipes**

According to the SBCA bylaws, all the buildings that are ground-plus-three storeys or above, or more than 43 feet, should be provided a set of standpipes system, which should be installed in a vertical position to which fire hoses can be connected, allowing manual application of water to the fire, said NED University earthquake engineering department chairperson Dr Muhammad Masood Rafi.

Every standpipe should be equipped with a fire department-approved inlet connection of corrosion-resistant metal. Rafi explained that the fire tenders have to make rounds of nearby Karachi Water and Sewage Board's water hydrants to get their tanks filled in case of a fire. Whereas ideally, he said, there should be tanks within the buildings specifically to provide water to fire trucks.

According to him, the fire department must show a list of how many inlet pipes they have approved so far. "They don't even correspond with the SBCA on this," he said.

KMC's chief fire officer Tehseen Siddiqui responded that not once in his 20-year career has he seen any map of any building of the city being approved with their consent neither has anyone approached his department for approval of inlet pipes.

For the recent deadly blaze in Regent Plaza hotel, the chief rescue officer of the KMC, Muhammad Feroz, told The Express Tribune that there wasn't any water tanker available in the hotel from where we could get the water to extinguish the fire.

### **Automatic sprinkler system**

The bylaws further call for installation of automatic sprinkler systems in every institutional building that serves restrained or handicapped persons, in covered car parking areas in buildings, in bus garages or terminals for passengers serving more than four buses at a time, on each floor of industrial buildings that are more than one-storey high, in all the building compartments used for manufacture, display or sale of combustible material and products that are more than 7,000 square feet, in all the building areas used primarily for storage of goods, which are more than 1,000 square feet.

Also, the bylaws say that the automatic sprinkler system should be fed by an overhead water tank reserved solely for this purpose and the tank should be capable of supplying 25% of the sprinkler heads for 20 minutes.

Talking about this, Rafi said that hardly any building of the city follows this instruction. "God knows how they get approval from the SBCA," he said.

### **KMC council passes resolutions on revised budget, LG powers, others**

#### **Manual fire extinguisher**

One manual fire extinguisher should be provided in each 2,400-square-foot area of public assembly buildings, said Rafi, adding these include wedding halls and any kind of enclosed area where public gathers. Also, the bylaws say that at least one extinguisher should be available on each and every floor at stairway landings and in corridors at each lift or group of lifts in residential and commercial buildings.

#### **Interior fire alarm**

An interior fire alarm system should be installed in hotels, motels and dormitories higher than one storey and with a capacity of 50 or more occupants. All kinds of hospitals and institutional buildings accommodating more than 20 occupants above the ground should also have an interior fire alarm system. Also, all school buildings with a provision of more than 30 students above the ground floor, mercantile buildings, factory buildings and cinemas, theatres and similar public assembly places should have this alarm system installed.

#### **Signal stations**

According to Rafi, the buildings must have signal stations, which must be connected with the nearby fire stations that would in case of a fire alarm the fire stations through signals.

To this, Siddiqui responded that they do not have any such facility and, in most of the cases, they come to know about the fire outbreak through the media.

### **Fire resistive structural requirements**

The bylaws require all kinds of buildings to have fire resistance structures as specified in the bylaws for buildings of different natures. Rafi said fire can make any building collapse and these bylaws require them to ensure that the structure should be able to resist the fire for a certain amount of time.

The wall should be constructed with non-combustible material, said Rafi. Every floor of a building should be divided in compartments by means of appropriate fire resistance. Rafi explained that the fire must be contained inside the room where it breaks and must not be able to spread.

### **Protected shafts**

Protected shafts should be constructed only for stairway lift, chute, duct or any other purpose that enables people, things or air to pass between different compartments. For this, Rafi explained that the smoke must not get trapped inside the building and should move out through these shafts. The air-conditioning ducts, he said, should also be protected from the fire entirely.

### **No mention of fire exits**

Ironically, the bylaws say nothing about fire exits, pointed out Rafi, adding that this is one of the major loopholes in the bylaws.

According to Feroz, in the Regent Plaza fire, there wasn't any ventilation system in the hotel, which was why several guests died due to suffocation. Even the fire exit passages, he recalled, were filled with smoke.

According to Siddiqui, barely a fraction of the buildings in Karachi follow the bylaws. One per cent of the factories in the city would have fire extinguishers, he estimated. "They use old methods of extinguishing fire through buckets of mud," he laughed.

### **Civil defence laws**

According to a 2014 notification issued by the then District South deputy commissioner (DC) Mustafa Jamal Kazi, and Korangi DC Zubair Ahmed Channa, all industrial units were asked to implement the prescribed fire fighting arrangements and associated protective measures falling under rules of the Civil Defence Act 1951 within 15 days.

These units were supposed to set up their own civil defence organisation, establish a fire fighting squad and obtain necessary training from the provincial Civil Defence Department. All factories and commercial units were also asked to establish a 'warning system' and provide adequate 'means of escape'.

According to KMC's Feroz, nothing close to such provisions was present at Regent Plaza or the Baldia Town garment factory. This notification remains only on paper, he pointed out.

### **Alarming state of Civil Defence**

After the blaze of the Regent Plaza hotel, Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah headed a meeting to inquire about whose responsibility it was to conduct inspections. According to an official of the KMC who was present at the meeting, a senior official of the Civil Defence department replied to the CM, saying, "It was our duty."

Before that, neither the CM nor any of his cabinet members had any idea about whose mandate it was to inspect the buildings regarding fire safety. "The CM asked the official to tell them how many employees they have in their department," said the official, adding that the Civil Defence department's official failed to answer any query.

The deputy director of the Civil Defence department, Arshad Ali, told The Express Tribune that under the Civil Defence 1952 Act, they operate under the provincial as well as the federal governments. Their

inspectors are deployed in all the districts of Sindh and work under the respective deputy commissioners, he said. One of their functions is to inspect safety measures of all the buildings, he added.

However, a former director of the department, requesting anonymity, shared that they have only 290 employees working in the entire province and they are legally bound to conduct inspection of all kinds of buildings yearly. Unfortunately, he added, they do not have enough manpower and facilities available with them. In other cities of Sindh, he said, the department does not even exist physically.

### **Ineptitude : Foam enough to put out fire in only one truck: KMC**

A senior official of Karachi Metropolitan Corporation's (KMC) fire department says the corporation has fire extinguisher foam not more than what is needed to put out a fire in a single oil truck.

As for the refineries, they must rely on their own emergency response systems. "We have 22 fire stations, most of which do not have any fire extinguisher foam," he said. "Even if some have it, it is less than 100 cans."

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He added that each fire station should have a thousand cans of fire extinguisher foams. KMC chief fire officer Tehseen Siddiqui agreed that they have to make a yearly tender for acquisition of foam but for many years could not issue the tender due to financial constraints. In case of fire, he said, they have to ask the contractors to provide them some foam then and there on credit. "This is how it works when you don't have money," he said.

Apart from that, the official said they have only 19 out of 26 fire brigades functional in the city. Ideally, he said, they should have at least 100 brigades for a city like Karachi. Only one snorkel is functional out of four, he said, adding that they have one rescue vehicle, which was imported in 1985 and is used for all kinds of calamities in the city.

The last fire station, according to senior KMC municipal services director Masood Alam, was constructed in 1990 in Bhains Colony.

Since that, he said, the Master Plan department has not provided them any space for fire stations. In 2001, a request was also made in this regard, he added.

As for the budget of the KMC's fire department, Alam said there are three components. The first component is of establishment, in which they pay Rs18 million as overtime to their employees and as much amount goes in their salaries.

The second component, he said, is of maintenance, for which they pay Rs25 million for the maintenance of their fire vehicles. The third component is for capital investment, he said, adding that they have no money earmarked for that.

The port fire officer of the Karachi Port Trust, Saeed Jadoon, told The Express Tribune that they have 18 fire tenders and one snorkel. He added their only fire-fighting ship has been grounded recently and they will soon purchase a new one.

For a city like Karachi, an expert on fire law, Shariq Ali, said the international response time of fire tenders should not be more than three minutes. Comparing Karachi with New York, he said the latter has 750 fire stations while its population is far less than Karachi's.

According to a study that Ali conducted, the total industrial area of the city is 275 square kilometres and in order to meet the international response time, one fire station must be constructed at every nine square kilometres in the industrial areas.

(By Oonib Azam The Express Tribune 13, 22/02/2017)

## Civil Defence's Warning Operational Centre – then and now

If any foreign military invasion occurs, civilian organisations are completely ill-prepared, says the deputy director of the Civil Defence directorate, Muhammad Arshad.



He was speaking to The Express Tribune about the deteriorating condition of the Civil Defence's Warning Operational Centre (WOC). According to him, the entire world has been upgrading this system and the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) has written to the government several times to upgrade their service. However, he says, the government does not pay heed.

According to him, Kargil war was the last time when the government thought about repairing the control room. However, nothing substantial happened even then, he lamented.

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### **Purpose of the dept**

The Civil Defence department falls under the federal and provincial governments' interior and home ministries. The function of the department is to assist the armed forces during times of war or emergency by setting a communication setup between the armed forces and public.

### **Wither fire safety: Karachi at mercy of an ill-resourced emergency response system**

During times of peace, the department is supposed to conduct basic training for awareness regarding fire fighting, casualty, rescue and warden services and air raid courses. It is also responsible for the inspection of fire safety of all the buildings in Sindh.

### **Sirens in wartime**

Back in the day, the Civil Defence department's WOC, situated in its headquarters in Garden, was used for sirens that used to blare whenever an Indian fighter plane would invade the port city or any other sort of threat emerged during the war.

"Blaring of air raid siren used to scare us," says elderly Shahida Qazi while recalling the chronicles of the 1965 and 1971 wars. "We immediately used to turn off lights to hide ourselves in trenches or hideouts. The fire jets used to fly low over our houses and there used to be a complete blackout."

The sirens were installed at 72 different government buildings and also at a few petrol pumps of the port city after the formation of Civil Defence – formally known as Air Raid Precaution before Partition – in 1952.

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Forty-six years down the lane, while the military is fully prepared to tackle any foreign army invasion, the civilian department, which has a vital role to play during the wars in communication with the public, is in an apathetic state and needs some immediate attention.

### **A tour of the Warning Operation Centre**

The control room, situated in the basement of the Civil Defence department's headquarters, has remained closed for years. On a visit to the control room, huge cobwebs dangling from the roof and light fixtures – the only functional gadgets in the room – welcome you. Layers of dust have gathered on all the equipment and furniture around.

"The system has completely collapsed now," says an official of the department. He explains how their WOC had a very effective liaison network with the Pakistan Air Force's (PAF) Sector Air Command during the wars. The WOC, he says, used to comprise experts of the Civil Defence department. As soon as the PAF used to gauge any air intervention on its radars, they immediately used to inform the WOC. From the WOC, he says, the information used to be disseminated to the Combined Control and Report Centre (CCRC), where representatives of all the essential services and vital installations of the city used to be present round the clock in one room until the war ended.

As you enter the CCRC room, which is also situated in the basement of the Civil Defence headquarters, sunlight peeks through the small windows on the corner of the roof. A huge table in the middle surrounded by wooden chairs, all covered in dust, speak of how once the officials used to coordinate in a stressed environment while threats of attack loomed on the horizon.

In one corner lies a big map of the city. A board is attached to the wall, having name tags of all the essential services such as the Karachi Development Authority, Sui Southern Gas Company, Karachi Metropolitan Corporation and Karachi Water and Sewerage Board inscribed on it.

If any damage occurred due to war, the representatives of the essential services used to be informed through the WOC. Then and there, they used to dispatch their respective teams to the scene. Adjacent to the CCRC room, the control room is situated, where a huge mechanical board with lots of keys and small lights and considerably large telephone receiver are attached.

A small panel on the board covered with a dust-laden glass cover shows district-wise locations of the 72 sirens installed in the various parts of the city. While cleaning the glass with his finger, he shows that they have allotted the number '6' for Liaquatabad in District Central. "If Liaquatabad was found under threat, they would turn number 6 switch on," he explains, adding that just above the switch, two small bulbs are attached. If green bulb lit, it meant the siren has started ringing. If the siren rings out with alternating low and high voices, it meant there is a chance of an attack, he says. If the siren rings in one tone, it meant the situation has normalised.

### **Sirens for Ramazan now**

Over the passage of time, says the official, no war occurred after 1971 and they started using their siren services for announcing Sehr and Iftar times in the month of Ramazan. According to him, the control panel also has a master key, pressing which would ring out all the 72 sirens installed in the city, which helps them operate all the sirens at the same time across the city in Ramazan.

Also, he says, all the 72 sirens are made to blare simultaneously in the city on August 14 on the instructions of the federal government.

(By Oonib Azam The Express Tribune 13, 27/02/2017)

## **Four parties stage protests in city to highlight civic issues**

A number of major political parties in the metropolis took to the streets on Friday and staged separate protest demonstrations at different spots to raise their voice for a variety of civic issues.

Four parties — the Pak Sarzameen Party, Jamaat-i-Islami, Muttahida Qaumi Movement-Pakistan and Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf — staged their separate sit-ins outside the Karachi Press Club, head offices of the K-Electric and Karachi Water and Sewerage Board (KWSB) and Cantonment Board Clifton (CBC), respectively.

It is widely believed that the sudden realisation of the civic problems being faced by the people of Karachi since long by all these parties actually aims at mobilising their respective cadres and to gain public sympathy ahead of the 2018 general election.

Unlike last week's violent protests of the JI and PTI, the four demonstrations, by and large, remained peaceful as no incident of violence was reported and three of the four protests ended smoothly. The PSP had already announced that its protest sit-in would continue for an indefinite period.

The PSP's protest, which began on Thursday, against civic problems as well as "poor governance and corruption" of the PPP-led Sindh government entered its second day on Friday.

Both tracks of the road in front of the press club have been blocked for vehicular traffic. A large number of party workers and supporters spent the night between Thursday and Friday on the road along with their leadership and were joined by more people in the morning.

Mr Kamal and other leaders occasionally spoke to the media and made it clear that they would not end their protest until the resolution of the people's problems.

The PSP chairman vowed to fight for the peoples' rights "without firing a bullet or becoming violent".

He demanded that the KWSB be brought under the administrative control of the Karachi mayor so that the people of the metropolis could hold him accountable.

He also lashed out at K-Electric for "looting" the people by overbilling and asked the authorities to arrest the chief executive officer of the power utility for a transparent probe on allegations of overbilling.

"Our movement will not end. If we leave this place [press club] we will go somewhere else to lodge protest for our people," he added.

### **JI's protest against K-Electric**

Workers and supporters of the JI gathered outside the K-Electric headquarters in Defence and staged a sit-in against "prolonged power outages and overbilling" by the power utility.

It was the second such protest by the JI in one week.

Hafiz Naeem-ur-Rahman, the chief of the JI's city chapter, vowed that the protest drive would continue until strict action against the power utility that had "extorted" billions of rupees from Karachiites is taken.

Addressing the protesters, he asked the people of Karachi to join the JI campaign and "if you would not come out to raise your voice, K-Electric will not bother to improve itself and continue extorting money from your pockets for supplying electricity merely for 12 hours in a day".

He explained that the JI took to the streets after all its efforts went unheard and the KE management did not bother to listen.

"The Jamaat-i-Islami has decided to launch a peaceful campaign with the support of Karachiites and it's an encouraging sign that it has been gaining momentum with each passing day," Hafiz Naeem said.

The sit-in continued for around seven hours and ended peacefully after the speech of JI Sindh chief Mairajul Huda Siddiqui.

Meanwhile, the KE rejected the JI allegations and claimed that "all billing is done as per regulatory processes and guidelines".

### **PTI's protest against CBC**

Residents of Clifton and members of the PTI continued their protest outside the CBC office against imposition of a new tax on supply of water through tankers.

Led by PTI leader and area MNA Arif Alvi, the protesters demanded the CBC authorities to withdraw the tax — Rs500 per tanker — and provide water through the pipelines. In the morning, the protesters turned violent when they came to resume their protest and found the office locked. They were denied entry inside the office while no one paid any heed to their protest. Chanting slogans against the management, some of the protesters lost their cool and became violent.

Realising the situation, the CBC's additional chief executive officer, who was present inside the office, agreed to hold talks with a delegation of protesters.

He gave assurance to the delegation comprising Mr Alvi, PTI MPA Samar Ali Khan and others that the new tax would be revisited in a board meeting this month and the issue would be solved amicably.

Mr Khan told Dawn that the protesters dispersed peacefully following the assurance of the CBC official.

### **MQM's protest against KWSB**

Residents of North Karachi along with their elected representatives belonging to the MQM-Pakistan staged a sit-in at the headquarters of the KWSB on Sharea Faisal against an acute water shortage and mixing of sewage in water lines.

Carrying placards and shouting slogans against the KWSB management, the protesters demanded immediate supply of water and repair of damaged lines due to which sewage was getting mixed with water.

A delegation comprising area MNA Shaikh Salahuddin and MPAs Jamal Ahmed and Waseem Qureshi called on KWSB Managing Director Hashim Raza Zaidi and informed him of their problems.

The KWSB chief assured the delegation that all illegal connections would be removed and an equitable distribution of water in North Karachi would be ensured.

Upon his assurance, the protesters wrapped up their sit-in and dispersed peacefully.  
(Dawn 17, 08/04/2017)

### **Blaze in high-rise exposes inefficiency of city's fire department**

A huge fire erupted in a 19-storey building on I.I. Chundrigar Road in the small hours of Saturday, exposing the inefficiency of the city's ill-equipped fire department in dealing with fires in high-rise structures.

Officials said that the fire broke out on the ninth floor of the 19-storey Saima Trade Tower at about 4am and spread to its 15th, 16th and 19th floors through air-conditioning ducts.

It took over 12 hours to "control" the fire as cooling work was under way till late night. No casualty was reported.

Fourteen fire tenders took part in the day-long fire-fighting operation, Mohammad Aslam, the officer in charge of the fire department's Boulton Market station, told Dawn at the site of the incident.

Aslam said a lack of fire safety measures in the building and shortage of water hampered the fire-fighting operation. He said the top floor had only one access which also made it difficult to control the fire.

He said four persons, mostly building guards, were rescued.

The chief of Manzoor Colony fire station, Zulfiqar, was injured by glass shards falling from the building during the fire-fighting operation.

The entrance of the building on Dr Ziauddin Ahmad Road was strewn with shards of glass falling from the affected floors.

Several offices were located in the building but the employees were not allowed to enter the premises on Saturday because of the fire.

A newspaper employee whose office was located on the 11th floor told Dawn that they had to make alternative arrangements at another building to bring out the paper the next day.

Chief Fire Officer Tehseen Siddiqui told reporters that the fire department was informed about the incident at around 4.45am by someone from the neighbouring building.

Realising the gravity of the inferno, which had been declared a third-degree fire, more fire tenders were called from across the city.

He believed that the cause of the fire was an electrical short circuit in the building's air-conditioning system.

He said that a lack of snorkels and fire safety measures made it difficult for the firefighters to control the blaze.

The fire chief conceded that his department had no resources to control a blaze if it erupted on the 18th floor.

He said the fire department's pumps were around 25 years old and these could not carry water up to the 18th floor with pressure.

The city needed modern and big snorkels to control the fire in multistorey buildings, he added.

He claimed that they had informed the authorities concerned about the prevailing state of affairs but no action was taken.

Karachi Mayor Wasim Akhtar also seconded his views.

"I had warned the Sindh government around four months ago when I was released from prison that the fire department was not properly equipped to tackle fire incidents," he told reporters at the scene of the blaze.

Referring to the injured fireman, who was hit by glass shards, he said the firefighters even lacked helmets.

He said that since the last eight years no fire equipment was procured. He said the city at least needed two snorkels to meet any eventuality in case fires erupted at two separate places simultaneously.

The mayor blamed the provincial government for corruption in the process of procurement of snorkels.

He conceded that at present the fire department had no equipment to put out a blaze if it broke out on the 17th floor of a high-rise building.

(By Imtiaz Ali Dawn 17, 30/04/2017)

### **High-rise blaze exposes ill-equipped fire department**

A fire in a multi-storeyed building situated on Il Chundrigar Road has exposed the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC) fire department's incapability to cope with such incidents in the high-rises of the city.



The fire brigade failed to control the blaze that broke out on the 16th floor of the Saima Trade Tower on Saturday. KMC Municipal Services Director Masood Alam informed The News in the wee hours of Sunday that the fire had rekindled in a room of the floor.

Earlier, the fire brigade control room said four fire tenders of the KMC were dispatched to the Saima Trade Tower-B on receiving information at 5am.

When the fire trucks arrived on the site, they informed the central control room that the blaze had erupted on the 16th floor and that they did not have pipes to ensure water supply in the affected area.

The fire brigade declared the intensity of the blaze to be of third degree and dispatched a snorkel to take part in the firefighting operation, but all in vain. The snorkel sent to douse the fire could reach only up to the 13th floor, and the firefighters connected pipes to ensure supply of water.

By the time the fire brigade conveyed water to the affected floor, the offices situated there had been completely burnt.

“The fire spread to all sections of the 16th floor when I reached on the spot at 9:30am,” Aram Bagh SHO Atif Rauf told The News. “I myself rescued two people, namely Noorullah and Mustafa, on the affected floor and shifted them to the hospital.”

He confirmed that the fire had damaged a portion of the 17th floor and reached up to the 18th and 19th floors, but the blaze could not be extinguished until 8pm. The fire damaged the 16th, 18th and 19th floors completely and a section of the 17th floor partially.

The affected building also houses offices of different media outlets.

Chief Fire Officer (CFO) Tehseen Ahmed said the fire on the 16th floor had been controlled, but the blaze reached up to the 18th and 19th floors, adding that 12 KMC fire tenders, two water bowsers and a snorkel had participated in the firefighting operation.

He claimed that there was no fire extinguishing system installed in the affected building and that the management had not adopted pre-emptive measures to cope with an incident.

Meanwhile, when the central fire brigade control room was contacted at night to determine the situation, it was learnt that the blaze had erupted on the 14th floor and that it had been doused.

But SSP (South) Saqib Ismail Memon confirmed that the fire broke out on the 16th floor and that it had damaged the 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th floors. When he was asked to comment on the current situation, he said he would be able to respond after checking with the relevant officials.

The control room operator said 15 to 20 KMC fire tenders took part in the firefighting operation and now the process of cooling down was under way.

Karachi Mayor Waseem Akhtar reached II Chundrigar Road to inspect the firefighting operation. He reiterated that the fire brigade needed improvement, and claimed that he had forwarded a list of equipments that needed to be purchased or repaired to the Sindh government, but he was yet to hear back from them.

He admitted that the fire brigade did not have adequate facilities to douse fires in multi-storeyed buildings. “The firefighters don’t even have helmets to protect themselves. Keeping in view the demand of the city, I believe the fire brigade needs 10 times more facilities.”

#### Fire at kidney institute

Kidney patients undergoing dialysis and other medical treatments at the Tabba Kidney Institute (TKI) in Azizabad had to be evacuated in haste after a fierce fire ravaged the fifth floor of the centre, adds M. Waqar Bhatti.

“I was undergoing dialysis when I heard an explosion and there was panic in the hospital as people screamed ‘fire’,” said Javed Chaudhry. “Some hospital staff ran outside while some of them evacuated patients undergoing dialysis and other medical treatments.”

He said he saw some patients evacuated on stretchers while many ran outside, adding that some of them were bleeding when they ran for safety. “Once outside, I saw the fifth floor in flames, and no fire tender was there when the patients were being evacuated.”

He added that the hospital staff, the patients' attendants and people from the nearby Madni mosque rushed to the rescue of the patients. "They evacuated patients on stretchers, wheelchairs and on feet, as the elevators stopped functioning due to disruption of electricity."

Fire brigade officials said three fire tenders had been dispatched to the hospital from the Sohrab Goth Fire Station, adding that the blaze had erupted on the fifth floor that housed the cafeteria and the generator.

TKI COO Dr Aqeel Ahmed said the fire had erupted in the kitchen on the top floor, due to which a gas cylinder exploded and destroyed the entire floor. "All the patients were evacuated timely."

Fire brigade officials said that there were no firefighting arrangements or emergency exits in the building, but fortunately, no casualty was reported.

The building was still engulfed in thick, black smoke until the filing of this report, and the authorities were awaiting a signal from the firefighters to enter the building to ascertain the damage.  
(The News 13, 30/04/2017)

### **Going down in flames: Only 14 of KMC's 21 fire stations are functional**

The Sindh government has left the port city out on a limb as the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC) fire brigade department is experiencing a major financial crisis, due to which 14 of its 21 fire stations are functional.

A letter in this regard was written by KMC Chief Fire Officer Tahseen Siddiqui to a local government department research officer, Akhlaque Khan Yousufzai. Karachi, being a metropolitan city with 20 land-owning agencies and a population of over 23 million, lacks adequate resources to cope with emergencies, thereby compromising the life and property of the residents, the letter reads. It adds that none of the agencies ever consulted the fire brigade departments while issuing permits and licences for high-rise buildings.

"It is a fact that Karachi has no more [room for] horizontal growth, all [growth is] vertical but KMC is not equipped to deal with emergencies [in high-rise buildings]. All [the] stakeholders of the city are working in silos. Unfortunately, the due priority for the city's emergency responders was never accorded in policy-making," reads the letter.

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#### **Famous Karachi bakery left in the lurch after fire brigade fails to respond to calls**

Currently, according to the letter, the fire brigade department has only 10 fire tenders operational out of 48 and, as a result, 13 fire stations are out of commission. Not a single fire tender is currently available to respond to any emergency situation in the entire District Central. "All three fire stations located within the administrative boundaries of District Central are out of commission," adds the letter. "Thus, the fire department is not even capable of controlling or extinguishing fires on the ground either."

The fire department, according to the letter, is primarily lacking advanced fire-fighting rescue equipment. The recent fires at Regent Plaza Hotel and Saima Trade Towers are evidence of this.

"There is an acute shortage of fire-fighting vehicles, equipment and consumable items. Thus, a bailout package for fire brigade is [essential]," it reads.

Regarding the current status of snorkels available to the fire department and the construction of high-rise buildings in the city, only one snorkel of 40 metres donated by Japan is in working condition while two Vema Snorkels of 45 metres are under repair and will soon be available to the fire brigade. Likewise, the letter says that the oldest Simon Snorkel of 30 metres is also out of order and needs major repair.

### **700 workers left jobless after Landhi fire**

“Nevertheless, the Sindh government is in a process of purchasing a new snorkel of 104 metres, which will be handed over to the Karachi Fire Brigade this year,” it states.

Responding to the letter, an official of the Sindh government told The Express Tribune requesting anonymity that due to over-employment and illegal promotions, KMC spends all its finances on salaries.

According to the official, every month the Sindh government gives KMC a grant of Rs140 million for their expenses. For the fire brigade, the official said the Sindh government is going to hand over a snorkel worth Rs500 million and three regular fire tenders soon.

(The Express Tribune 14, 20/05/2017)

## **Factory management blames fire brigade for inferno in SITE**

No loss of life was reported during a fire that broke out on Sunday at a plastic factory in SITE area.



The fire erupted at around 9:30am on the ground floor of the factory located in the Labour Square area of SITE. The factory, spread over 1,600 square yards, produced plastic chairs.

Fire brigade officials termed the blaze a third-degree fire. Fire tenders from all over the city were called to extinguish the flames.

Apart from the fire tenders from the local government, fire-fighters from the Karachi Port Trust and Pakistan Navy also participated in extinguishing the fire.

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Explosions were heard from inside the factory, as boilers, generators and chemical drums were set off.

Rescue teams also faced difficulties in battling the fire due to the intensity of the wind. Fortunately, no loss of life was reported in the fire, as no labourers were present inside the factory when the flames erupted as it was a holiday.



Police and Rangers personnel cordoned off the site to prevent passersby from approaching the factory. Police officials said they reached the site to disperse the gathering crowd that would obstruct fire-fighting work. Police said so far they have not ascertained the cause of the fire and could not make any assumptions until the fire brigade department issues its final report.

Fire-fighters feared the inferno could spread to a nearby K-Electric grid station and petrol pump. The pump was immediately evacuated and the fire-fighters were able to prevent the buildings from catching fire.

### **Fire breaks out in 19-storey building on II Chundrigar Road**

The fire brigade spokesperson said that initially, three fire tenders were sent to the site but were not enough to douse the inferno, which is why more vehicles were dispatched, including water tankers.

The factory administration blamed the fire brigade department for using delay tactics and not operating properly. “They reached the spot late with not enough vehicles or equipment,” claimed the factory management. “They did not even have water or foam to douse the fire. They are responsible for our loss of millions of rupees,” accused the management.

On the other hand, fire brigade officials said that they did their level best to douse the fire. “We are not magicians,” said a fire brigade official, Zafar Khan. “We tried our level best. We could not douse the fire in

few minutes because there were lots of chemicals and plastic present inside the factory. Strong winds also caused difficulties for us in extinguishing the fire,” he explained.

Khan said all the available vehicles were dispatched immediately to the site to douse the fire, adding that they also ran out of foam soon into the fire-fighting operation.

### **Going down in flames: Only 14 of KMC’s 21 fire stations are functional**

Following the request of the local government’s fire officials, fire tenders from the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board (KWSB), Pakistan Navy and Karachi Port Trust also reached the site to aid the fire-fighting efforts.

Due to the shortage of water during the operation, KWSB Managing Director Hashim Raza Zaidi directed the authorities concerned to open the water hydrants to supply water to the fire-fighters.

Karachi Mayor Wasim Akhtar also visited the site of the inferno to oversee fire-fighting operations and direct the authorities to make all efforts to battle the blaze. While speaking to the media, Akhtar criticised the Sindh government for not making the fire brigade department self-sufficient. “The fire department does not have the necessary equipment to deal with such incidents,” he lamented.

“All the vehicles have been utilised here and in case of an incident elsewhere in the city [the department] would have no fire tenders to utilise,” he said.

The wall on one side of the factory collapsed, while the remaining sections of the building were damaged. (By Faraz Khan The Express Tribune 13, 22/05/2017)

### **Rescue the rescuers: ‘Karachi’s fire department needs new machinery’**

The city’s mayor, Wasim Akhtar, has requested the Chief of Army Staff and Chief Justice of Pakistan to help procure machinery for the fire and rescue department. He has also requested immediate support from the federal and Sindh governments.



Akhtar said this while attending a fire department rehabilitation ceremony near Peoples Chowrangi as chief guest. He informed the media on the occasion that ever since he took over the office of the mayor he had focused on bringing changes in the city’s rescue department.

He said that when he was sworn in as mayor only one snorkel was available for rescue operations. However, he managed to repair another two snorkels, which are now ready to take part in rescue operations. He explained that 18 fire tenders are being repaired and will soon join the existing fleet. Out of the 22 fire stations in the city, Akhtar said 18 fire stations are operational, but a city this large needs at least 230 fire stations. He said at least Rs5 billion is needed for the improvement of the fire brigade.

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Snorkels are able to extinguish fires at buildings with a maximum height of eight floors but Karachi is a thriving city with a multitude of buildings and plazas that exceed this floor limit.

### **Mayor not satisfied with security measures in Karachi**

Without improving the rescue department and a moratorium on permission being granted to construct high-rise buildings, Akhtar said he fears sooner or later a high-rise will catch fire and the department will be helpless to rescue its inhabitants.

Akhtar also mentioned that the fire department’s fire fighters did not even have proper uniforms and their salaries were also always delayed. But at the end of the day, they are the ones putting their lives at risk to rescue citizens, he said. “The fire department has been neglected just like the government provincial government has neglected the whole province,” lamented Akhtar.

The mayor went on to criticise lawmakers and said politicians who prefer to spend most of their time in Islamabad should be concerned about the city that feeds the whole country with its revenue, because if the condition of Karachi deteriorates then the whole country will suffer.

### **SHC seeks government's reply on mayor's petition seeking devolution of SSWMB**

He added that all the ministers and government officials receive new vehicles while the fire department is using 35-year-old machinery.

We have written to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah to improve the conditions of the fire department on an immediate basis otherwise if the city faces any severe calamity it will be difficult to save the lives of the people, he told participants at the event. He advised residents to install fire extinguishers at offices, schools and homes in order to counter any emergency situations.

I request everyone – the chief justice, Chief of Army Staff and even the National Assembly speaker and Senate chairperson – to pass a resolution for the betterment of this department, he pleaded.

Also present at the event, Faisal Edhi, head of the Edhi Foundation, said that many of these fire engines were out of order and it was due to the mayor's hard work that they had been brought into a working condition.

Edhi added that throughout the world, these vehicles are not used for more than five years, however, in Karachi they were being used for over 30 years. He added that the fire department has great potential and sincere officers, as they managed to perform rescues in the city despite limited resources, therefore the federal and provincial government should come forward and support the mayor.

(The Express Tribune 14, 24/06/2017)