

Bangladesh: Factory fire kills 24

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At least 24 people died in a fire that broke out in the ninth floor of an 11-storey apparel factory building of the Ha-Meem Group at Ashulia on Tuesday.

Unconfirmed sources, however, claimed that the death toll could be higher. Twenty-one bodies reached the Dhaka Medical College Hospital morgue till 1:00am.

More than 200 were injured.

Fire fighters were on a search for workers trapped in the building at 1:00am. They were kept on alert as smokes were coming out although the fire was doused at 9:30pm.

Most of the people died after they had jumped out of the building panicked during the fire that spread soon to the whole of the 11th floor and upward when the workers were having take lunch in the canteen on the 10th floor, survivors admitted to different hospitals said.

Injured workers and witnesses said that most of the workers fell from the building when they were trying to climb down pieces of cloths they dropped down from the ninth floor.

The workers alleged that emergency exits were closed and the workers could not come down the stairs as the whole of 10th floor was dark and filled with smoke.

Eleven of the deceased who could be identified were machine operators Maruf Hossain, 22, Anjana Begum, 27, Mansura Begum, 30, Babul Hossain, 23, Halima Begum, 25, Runa, 32, Tania Sultana, 18, Himel, 28, Mozzamel Haque, 40, iron man Faridul Islam, 35, and sample man Russel Ahmed, 25.

Most of the eighteen died by suffocation or after jumping out of the building. One of them, yet to be identified, died from burns, the workers said.

Survivors said the fire had broken out about 1:10pm on the ninth floor which houses That's It Sportswear Ltd, a garment unit of the Ha-Meem Group at Narshingapur.

Ha-Meem Group's deputy general manager Delwar Hossain told reporters that the fire had originated from the finishing section on the ninth floor of the building.

Although the factory has around 6,000 workers, most of them were out of the building as the fire broke out during at lunch time, Delwar said.

The government has formed a five-member committee, headed by home ministry's additional secretary Iqbal Ahmed Chowdhury, to investigate the incident. The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters' Association also formed a three-member committee.

One of the two bodies at Ashulia's Nightingale Hospital was identified by Halima Begum.

Abdur Rahim, who was injured in the fire, at the Shin Shin Japan Hospital said the workers were taking lunch on the 10th floor. "The fire created a smoke we felt suffocated." He said as two of the six

gates of the canteen were closed, workers jumped out the window by breaking the glasses.

Mahbub, quality inspector of the factory who was injured on the 11th floor and was admitted to a local hospital, said, "I saw smoke all around on the 11th floor and lowered a long piece of cloth and fell down when I tried to rappel down." He said that door of the 11th floor had been locked.

The Fire Service and Civil Defence director general, Abu Nayeem Mohammad Shahidullah, said that many were injured after they had jumped out of the building and some others were injured when they hurried to come down the stairway. It was taking time to put out the flames as the fabrics kept inside the factory caught fire, he said.

Shahidullah told the reporters about 7:30pm that the fire was under control.

Fourteen fire engines from stations at Dhamrai, Ashulia, Savar, Dhaka EPZ, Gazipur, Mirpur and the headquarters were trying to put out the flames. The fire fighters ran out of water, hampering efforts to search and pull out people "dead or alive" in the evening.

The BGMEA president, Abdus Salam Murshedy, said that the apex body of apparel factory owners would give Tk 100,000 to the family of each of the deceased. The Ha-Meem Group authorities will give Tk 100,000 to the family of each of the deceased and Tk 25,000 to the family of the injured.

Ha-Meem Group director retired major Sunil Kumar Sarker told New Age that fire had broken out on the ninth floor of the building.

The floor is designed and used as the warehouse of finished products. Bulk cartons of cotton-based shirts and bottoms, made for brands such as Gap and JC Penney, were stored there.

Sunil claimed that the floor was designed to the safety requirements and fitted with fire fighting equipment but he declined to guess what could be the reason of fire.

Another Ha-Meem Group official said the 10th floor was used for holding conferences and dining for workers. Each of the nine production floors of the factory could accommodate 1,400 workers, the official said.

Ashulia's is the largest unit of the Ha-Meem Group, one of the top five apparel exporters. The group, which has half a dozen large apparel units, employs more than 30,000 workers.

A huge contingent of lawmen was helping rescuers in the operation, local people said. Two helicopters hovered over the building for around two hours.

Several thousand people thronged the area as the floors were burning. The home minister, Sahara Khatun, and the lawmaker for the Savar constituency, Talukder Mohammad Touhid Jung Murad, also visited the place.

Traffic on the Abdullahpur'DEPZ Road was suspended after the fire.

A fire broke out in another factory of the same group, owned by AK Azad, the president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce, in 2009.

The latest fire incident in apparel factory took place on February 25 when at least 18 workers, including 13 women, were killed in the Garib Sweater Factory building in Gazipur.

Rashed Ahmed Savar

P.S.

* From New Age:

<http://www.newagebd.com/2010/dec/15/front.html>