

Pakistan: Safety flaws blamed as factory fires kill more than 300

Wednesday 12 December 2012, by [BOONE Jon](#) (Date first published: 13 September 2012).

Building standards criticised after deadly blazes at underwear factory in Karachi and illegal shoemaking operation in Lahore.

Rescue workers pull bodies out of a factory after a fire swept through the building in the Pakistani city of Karachi [Link to this video](#)

Factory fires in Pakistan's two biggest cities have killed more than 300 people – and been blamed on barred windows, shoddy building standards and the flouting of basic safety regulations.

At least 289 died after becoming trapped in a blazing underwear factory in the coastal megalopolis of Karachi on Tuesday evening. More were injured after trying to escape by jumping out of high windows of the five-floor building, including a pregnant woman.

That fire came just hours after a similar blaze in an illegally built shoe factory in Lahore, which killed at least 25.

Pakistani TV broadcast harrowing footage of the Karachi fire, the worst industrial disaster to hit the city in decades.

Rescue workers said the factory was a death trap, with many of those inside having no chance to escape the flames and toxic fumes.

Muhammad Ilyas, one of the injured workers, said he had been with about 50 other men and women on one of the floors when a fireball suddenly erupted from the staircase. "I jumped from my seat as did others and rushed toward the windows, but iron bars on the windows barred us from escaping. Some of us quickly took tools and machines to break the iron bars."

The twin tragedies will focus attention on the weak workplace safety regime in a country that relies heavily on its low-cost garment and textile industries for vital export earnings.

"There were no safety measures ... there was no emergency exit. All the people got trapped," said Amjad Farooqi, a senior Karachi police official.

Faulty wiring, unsafe chemicals and a lack of emergency exits were blamed for the deaths in the factory in a residential area of Lahore .

The efforts of firefighters and ambulances were hindered by huge crowds of onlookers.

One rescue officer, Ahmad Raza, told the *Dawn* newspaper that the fire had been triggered by faulty wiring in one part of the building, which he said ignited nearby chemicals that had not been properly stored.

Jon Boone in Islamabad

* guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 12 September 2012 10.29 BST:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/12/pakistan-factory-fires-karachi-lahore>

Details of Karachi fire emerge amid criticism of Pakistan's workplaces

Employees were trapped as flames consumed the decrepit structure, with exits either locked or blocked by heaps of clothes.

Further details have emerged of the fire that ripped through a Karachi clothes factory killing 289 workers on Wednesday, amid growing criticism of the conditions in the country's workplaces.

During an official day of mourning in the huge coastal city, trade unionists and business people all said safety regulations were often not enforced in the garment manufacturing industry.

Employees were trapped as flames consumed the decrepit, warehouse-like structure. Exits were either locked or blocked by heaps of finished merchandise. Some people managed to escape by smashing through iron grills covering the windows and jumping several storeys down to the ground.

Murder charges have been registered against both the factory bosses and government officials for showing "utter negligence".

Siraj Qasim Teli, a senior member of the Karachi Chambers of Commerce and Industry said the country must take this opportunity to change the system of sweatshop manufacturing before national outrage fades.

"In this country when an incident like this takes place everyone in government rushes on to the television to make mileage to cool down the atmosphere," he said. "But then within ten days it is all forgotten and it happens again."

Mohiuddin Razak, a former garment manufacturer, said clothes makers were operating on wafer thin margins and cutting corners in order to compete on price with factories in Bangladesh and Vietnam. He said: "Often we would sew \$25 price tags into T-shirts we were selling for \$4. As long as so much of that value is not passed down to suppliers people will bribe inspectors to avoid the rules."

Jon Boone in Islamabad

* guardian.co.uk, Thursday 13 September 2012 18.06 BST:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/13/karachi-fire-pakistan-workplaces?INTCMP=SRCH>
