

Pakistan - Ali Enterprises fire victims: Workers demand punishment to Balida factory culprits

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NTUF press conference

Workers demand punishment to Balida factory culprits

Karachi, February 12: Bereaved families of Ali Enterprises fire victims have demanded not to play political blame game on the dead bodies of their loved ones, but give a severe punishment to the cruel culprits, irrespective of who they are.

Addressing a press conference at Karachi Press Club (KPB) here Thursday, leaders of National Trade Union Federation (NTUF) and Balida Factory Fire Affectees Association along with some victims' families said the Balida factory fire tragedy has once again captured the attention of whole country after filing of a probe report about the tragedy in Sindh High Court (SHC). However, different political, religious and ethnic parties and outfits are busy in disgracing the blood of the martyrs to achieve their vested interests.

They said they want to present the point of view of the heirs and the real representatives of workers regarding this new development. They said after 29 months of this tragedy a report has been filed in Sindh High Court (SHC) in which the identity of the involved culprits and their group is revealed. However, on the basis of this report different political parties are busy in blaming one another, but no political party has taken solid steps for solving the problems of the bereaved families and deterring repetition of such incidents in Pakistani factories and industries. This negative attitude of these political parties is also condemnable because during last two and half years they have not raised the voice inside or outside parliament for solving the problems of the affectees. Today also they are doing nothing for the affectees but issuing fiery statements to settle score with their political rivals, which prove beyond doubt that all these parties are anti-worker in their character.

They said the court would decide if the fire was accidental or arson, but our demand is to give severe punishment to the culprits and their patrons. We also apprehend that making the JIT report a plea, the vested interests would try to save the real culprits including the factory owners, International Brands and Social auditing company of this sad incident and if so we would fully resist such a bid.

They said it is the basic question if the factory was burnt in accidental fire or arson, but it is also important to see if the factory had all precautionary arrangement to cope with such an incident and save the lives of its innocent workers. So far all reports and facts show that this factory was not registered under the Factory Act, and thus was working illegally. All its emergency exit gates were closed, and windows covered with heavy iron grills. Its passageways were closed with goods, which resulted in the martyrdom of 80percent workers.

Therefore, the affectees and the labor movement think that those running this factory illegally were

equally responsible for these deaths as they ignored the local and international health and safety laws and standards. These culprits include the owners of the factory, international brands for which they worked, international company that gave them audit certificate and other institutions related to the labor affairs. More than 90 percent of the factory workers were contract laborers, not registered with EOBI and other social security institutions. They used to work 12 to 14 hours daily in this sweat shop under third party contact system "Thakedari".

They said the government and State institutions should have learnt a lesson from this tragedy and have taken serious steps for improving working conditions of millions of workers of Pakistani factories and industries and securing their lives; however, the federal and provincial government adopted a criminal silence on this issue. Even today 90percent Pakistani factories are not registered. Ninety-five factories are run under the contractual labor system. Only 5 percent labors are registered with social security and EOBI. In private sector, particularly textile and garment industries, only 2 percent workers enjoy the right to make their labor unions.

The labor inspection system, necessary to assess the real working conditions inside factories, has been hampered, allowing the factory owners to treat their workers worse than slaves. Sindh, which houses more than 60percent of Pakistan's factories, has even no proper labor minister.

The international companies are violating local labor laws and international labor standards in Pakistan and earning billions of dollars through brutal exploitation of Pakistani workers. Its worst example is the German brand KIK, whose fault created the tragedy of Ali Enterprises Balida Karachi, taking lives of 259 workers. Moreover, the so-called international audit firms are continuously issuing certificate to the factories that exploit their labors, compelling them to work in very dangerous conditions. Thus these audit certificates are proving "death warrants" and "license to kill" for these workers. Italian company, RINA, is such a company that had issued such the certificate to the Baldia factory just two weeks before the sad incident. This company has already issued about 100 such certificates to other factories.

The heirs of Ali Enterprises fire victims even today are struggling for their rights on streets and in courts. However, the apathy of the government and all political parties could be seen from the fact that the heirs of 17 martyrs have yet to get DNA report and claim and bury their loved ones.

Pakistan got special concessions in 2014 under GSP Plus, under which it would earn the foreign exchange of more than 1bn US\$ yearly for selling its exports in the European markets and more than one million new jobs are expected in the textile and garment sectors in the years to come. However, despite this huge profit and revenue the factory owners and the government are ignoring their promises and commitments regarding the GSP Plus, under which they had to follow and respect 27 conventions on labor and human rights.

However, the speakers paid rich tribute to outgoing chief justice of Sindh High Court for doling out justice to the affectees.

The victims' association and the NTUF had decided to sue International brand KIK in Germany and auditing company RINA in Italy and for this legal process group of international lawyers had had visited Karachi last week and attended the general meeting of the victims' families on 8 feb at PMA House Karachi.

They demanded that a judicial commission should be established to probe into the Baldia factory fire which should issue its report in three months. They demanded that the Punjab government should immediately release the compensation as announced by the then opposition leader Mian Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, who is Prime Minister today. The compensation as announced by Malik Riaz of Bahria

Foundation is not paid to all heirs, and it should be paid to the remaining heirs. The chief minister of Sindh had announced to give a government employment and a plot to every bereaved family and this promise should be implemented. The report of Justice Qurban Ali on the Baldia factory fire should be made public. DNA certificates should be issued to remaining bereaved families.

All international brands getting products from Pakistan should be compelled to follow the local and international labour standards and laws. All the promises made to follow the labor laws under GSP Plus should be fulfilled. German brand KIK and Italian audit company RINA should accept the responsibility of the incident and give the affectees and heirs compensation as per international standards. Labor inspection system should be revived, and lives of workers secured by ensuring proper health and safety systems at workplaces.

Those spoke included Nasir Mansoor deputy general secretary National Trade Union Federation (NTUF), Muhammad Jabbir president Baldia Factory Fire Affectees Association, Rafiq Baloch vice president Pakistan Workers Confederation, Abdul Aziz general secretary Baldia Factory Fire Affectees Association, Gul Rehman convener Workers Rights Movement and Zahra Khan General Secretary Home-based Women Workers Federation (HBWWF) and labour leader Riaz Abbasi.

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