

Pakistan : Call to observe black day Rights bodies seek action against fire culprits

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KARACHI, Sept 13: Several labour, local and international human rights organisations condemning the Sept 11 industrial fire incidents on Thursday demanded stern action against culprits and immediate payment of compensation to the survivors and the heirs of hundreds of victims.

They also sought registration of criminal cases against the industrialists and government department heads who allowed the factories to operate without ensuring safety of workers.

Besides, they demanded that the ministers for industries, labour and local bodies be sacked for failing to get the relevant laws implemented.

The National Trade Union Federation, meanwhile, gave a call to observe Sept 15 as a black day in the wake of the Baldia fire tragedy.

These views and demands were made by the civil society representatives at different press conferences and protest demonstrations in the city.

Speaking at a press conference at the Karachi Press Club, senior labour leader Habibuddin Junaidi demanded that a high judicial commission, headed by a member of the superior judiciary, be set up to investigate causes of the tragic incident and action be taken against the industrialists who flouted the laws and relevant government departments which did not implement the relevant laws.

Criminal cases should be instituted against all those found involved, he added.

Mr Junaidi called for setting up a high-powered tripartite committee to evaluate performance of the labour departments in all the provinces and gave suggestions to improve their working so as to ensure safety at workplaces.

He demanded that at least Rs1 million be paid to the heirs of the deceased and one member of their family be provided employment.

He said it emerged that hundreds of people worked at the factory in Baldia without being issued appointment letters. They were employed through a third party contract system and many of them were children, he added.

He said it was unfortunate that most private organisations — industries, trading houses, banks, financial institutions etc — exploited employees by adopting anti-worker policies.

Other labour leaders present at the press conference were Noor Mohammad, Manzoor Razi, Aslam Samoon, Jaleel Shah, Haji Yaqoob, Manzoor Mallah, Lateef Mughal and Farhat Perveen.

The National Trade Union Federation, meanwhile, staged a protest demonstration outside the Karachi Press Club where its leader Nasir Mansoor gave a call for observing Sept 15 as a black day.

He said that factories had become death traps where workers were treated more like slaves than human beings. It was not the first case, as such incidents had been happening across the country in the past as well, he said.

This fire made headlines as the death toll was enormous, he said, adding that the fire had twice erupted in the same factory in the past too, but no action was taken against anyone to prevent such incidents.

He alleged that the factory was not properly registered under the Factories Act. Its building was not properly designed nor was its plan approved by the relevant building controlling authority, he added.

There was only one exit for over 500 workers and the windows were grilled and doorways were blocked with finished or semi-finished stuff. There was hardly any fire fighting equipment in the factory, he alleged.

On the occasion, People's Labour Bureau leader Shaikh Majeed reiterated the demand of Rs1 million compensation for the families of the deceased and Rs400,000 for every worker wounded in the fire in addition to their medical expenses.

To press the government to accept their demands, the demonstrators shouted slogans such as "criminal cases be registered against factory owners"; "regular inspections of factories by labour department officials"; "register all factories under the factories act"; "implement health and safety laws"; "abolish contract system"; "issue appointment letters to all workers" and "ensure social security, EOBI, etc benefits for workers."

In a communication to Pakistan, a Geneva-based international trade union, Industrial Global Union (IGU) stated that one of the objectives of Pakistan labour policy of 2010 was that "just and humane conditions of work be guaranteed to all workers". The IGU hoped that these would be applied to shoe-making and garment workers (in reference to the accidents in Karachi and Lahore in one day) in the country.

In a letter to Prime Minister Raja Pervaiz Ashraf, IGU Secretary General Jyrki Raina urged that medical support be given to the injured workers and moral as well as financial support be provided to the families of the deceased.

The secretary general requested the prime minister to ensure that factory owners paid substantial compensation to the victims and families of the victims; to ensure that workers continue to receive their salaries until relocation of the factory to a safer place and a decent compensation if factory closes completely; and to ensure that national safety laws are in place and properly implemented.

The Hong Kong-based Asian Human Rights Commission demanded that ministers of labour and industries in both the provinces (Sindh and Punjab) be investigated for their hand in allowing these factory owners to operate without any control.

The commission demanded that the government departments responsible for the safety and welfare of, not only the deceased workers but, more importantly, those still living, must be taken to task.

It also condemned the officials that instead of conducting credible investigations into the causes of fires, government ministers and authorities were shifting the blames on conspiracy theories that these fires were not accidental but were caused by terrorist elements to mark 9/11.

All this showed that human loss was of no importance to the authorities, it added.

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