

Karachi mall fire death toll rises to 23 as rescuers search for dozens missing

■ President, PM assure support to Sindh govt ■ CM Murad announces Rs10 million compensation for family of each victim ■ Authorities warn death toll could exceed 50 as recovery operations continue

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The death toll from a massive fire at a shopping plaza in Karachi rose to 23 on Monday as rescuers recovered more bodies from the badly damaged building, police said. Dozens remain missing.

Firefighters extinguished the blaze at the multistory plaza late Sunday, nearly 24 hours after it erupted, allowing rescue teams to enter the building. Authorities fear the death toll will rise as they look for 46 more people, according to city police chief Asad Raza.

Raza told The Associated Press on Monday that only six bodies

Sindh CM accepts mistakes on govt's part, orders probe into deadly fire

were identified so far. The rest will need DNA testing as the "bodies were beyond recognition," police surgeon, Dr. Summaiya Syed, said. She said that doctors were collecting DNA samples from the relatives of the missing individuals. According to local media, at least 26 people died in the blaze. Earlier, Sindh provincial Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah told a news conference in Karachi that rescue teams were searching for survi-

vors and the dead. He said those killed in the fire included a firefighter and that the government would provide 10 million rupees (US\$36,000) in compensation to the family of each person killed.

As night fell, rescuers continued to struggle to reach parts of the severely damaged building where some people were believed to be trapped after losing contact with their families the previous day. City Mayor Murtaza Wahab said the rescue operation would continue until all missing persons had been accounted for.

The fire spread quickly

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through shops storing cosmetics, garments and plastic goods, said Dr. Abid Jalal Sheikh, Karachi's chief rescue officer. Some of the relatives of the missing waited outside the burned-out plaza Monday, hoping for news.

Qaiser Ali said his wife, daughter-in-law and sister went shopping for an upcoming wedding event on Saturday and were inside the building when the fire broke out. He said he had spoken to all three by mobile phone on Sunday, but then they went silent. "I don't know what has happened to them or whether they are alive," Ali told the AP. "We are praying that all those missing come out safely," he said, as he continued trying to contact his missing family members.

Another man, Saifur Rehman, said he was inside the building when the fire broke. He said he managed to escape, but his brother Mohammad Abrar, who owns a shop in the plaza, was left behind. Rehman said he feared for his brother's safety.

The cause of the fire was not immediately known. Police said an investigation was underway. Karachi, the capital of Sindh province, has a history of dead-

ly fires, often blamed on poor safety standards and illegal construction. In November 2023, a fire at a shopping mall in the city killed 10 people and injured 22 others. A massive fire at a garment factory in Karachi in 2012 killed 260 people.

Authorities warned on Monday the death toll from a massive fire at a shopping plaza in Karachi could exceed 50, as recovery operations continued a day after the blaze destroyed over 1,200 shops in one of the city's busiest commercial districts.

The fire broke out late Saturday at Gul Plaza in Karachi's Saddar business area and spread rapidly through multiple floors. Firefighters battled for more than 24 hours to bring the blaze under control, which was fully extinguished by Monday, officials said, with cooling and debris removal now underway.

During a meeting at the Chief Minister's House on Monday, officials briefed Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah that 14 bodies had so far been recovered from the site, while the overall death toll could climb significantly as debris is cleared.

"Estimated fatalities could exceed 50," the Sindh chief minis-

ter's office said in a statement, quoting officials who briefed Shah on the scale of the disaster.

Shah was told that the shopping plaza, built over roughly 8,000 square yards, housed around 1,200 shops, leaving an equal number of traders suddenly without livelihoods. Shah said all affected shopkeepers would be rehabilitated and announced the formation of a committee to recommend compensation amounts and a recovery plan. "The Gul Plaza building will be rebuilt, and we want to decide how the affected traders can be given shops immediately so their businesses can resume," Shah said, according to the statement.

Officials said firefighting operations involved 16 fire tenders and water bowzers, with 50 to 60 firefighters taking part. The Karachi Water Board supplied more than 431,000 gallons of water during the operation, while Rescue 1122 ambulances reached the site within minutes of the first alert.

Authorities said access constraints inside the building, along with intense smoke, hampered rescue efforts in the early stages of the fire. A firefighter was among those killed, offi-

cialists said, noting that his father had also died in the line of duty years earlier. The provincial government ordered an immediate forensic investigation to determine the cause of the blaze, directing the chief secretary to notify a fact-finding committee. Shah also instructed that debris removal begin without delay so recovery teams could continue searching for victims. The tragedy has also heightened anxiety within Karachi's business community. President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif held separate telephonic conversations with Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah, to express condolences over the tragic fire incident at Gul Plaza in Karachi.

In his remarks, President Asif Ali Zardari inquired about the latest situation of the fire at Gul Plaza in Karachi, which had not been fully controlled despite continuous efforts for twenty-four hours.

He emphasized the need to mobilize all available resources for the rescue and firefighting operations. The President also praised firefighter Furqan Shaukat, who lost his life while battling the fire, and recom-

mended him for a civil award.

Additionally, he urged immediate medical care for the injured and support for the victims' families. The President stressed the importance of implementing fire safety laws and enhancing safety inspections in both commercial and residential buildings to prevent such incidents in the future.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif assured the Sindh government of full support of the federal government, underscoring the need for a coordinated fire control system in densely populated urban areas.

He offered the federal government's assistance in establishing a comprehensive system to prevent such tragedies.

Both leaders expressed their solidarity with the victims and the Sindh government during this difficult time.

Meanwhile, Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah assured that the affected shopkeepers would not be left alone and would be supported to get back on their feet.

"We have helped victims in the past, and we will do so again," he said, adding that a special committee has been constituted to assist the Gul Plaza affectees.