Owners Of Bangladesh Factory Where 7 Died Arrested

Julhas Alam, Associated Press

DHAKA, Bangladesh (AP) — Two owners of a Bangladesh garment factory where seven workers were killed in a weekend fire were arrested Thursday as police investigated allegations of murder and negligence.

Police were questioning Smart Export Garment Ltd. Chairman Sharif Ahmed and Managing Director Zakir Ahmed after a court placed them on a two-day remand.

Police say the only emergency exit to the Smart factory had been locked from outside when Saturday's fire occurred. Garment industry workers and labor rights groups had demanded the arrest of the owners.

The fire occurred just two months after a blaze killed 112 workers in a factory owned by Tazreen Fashions Ltd. The November fire raised an outcry about safety in Bangladesh's garment industry, which exports clothes to leading Western retailers. The gates of that factory also were locked.

Three managers accused of locking the doors of the Tazreen factory have been in custody since shortly after the fire, but the factory owner has not been arrested. A government committee set up to investigate the fire said in December that the fire was sabotage, but also said that no matter who set it, the owner should be punished for the deaths because he neglected worker safety.

Tazreen is a member of a powerful industry group, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, but Smart Export is not, according to the group.

Labor activist Kalpona Akter of the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity alleged that Tazreen's association with the industry group has blocked stiffer prosecution. A police duty officer declined to comment Thursday about the Tazreen case.

Fires have caused more than 600 deaths of garment workers in Bangladesh since 2005, according to research by the advocacy group International Labor Rights Forum.

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