

INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

Qatar Villaggio Nursery Fire: Justice Elusive for Victims

Brussels, 27 May 2013 (ITUC OnLine): Families of victims of the tragic Villaggio Mall fire, which cost 19 lives, are still waiting for the Qatari justice system to deliver one year on. Thirteen small children, four teachers and two fire-fighters lost their lives when they were unable to escape the Gympanzee Nursery inside the mall when the fire took hold. The children who died were from Canada, Egypt, France, Korea, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain and the United States.

Qatar's Ambassador to the European Union, Belgium and Luxembourg, Sheik Ali Bin Jasim Thani Al Thani, and his wife Mrs Iman Hamad Abdulaziz Al Kawari, are facing criminal proceedings in Qatar over the appalling lack of fire safety and protection at the nursery, which they owned. Despite court orders, Ambassador Al Thani and Mrs Kawari have failed to appear at several trial hearings in Doha, causing lengthy delays in the trial.

Bernadette Ségal, General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation, has written to the European Union's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy to raise concerns about the case.

Lax regulation and poor oversight mean that Qatar has one of the worst fire safety records of any rich country, with official figures showing that 90% of fires remain unexplained.

The charges against Sheik Al Thani and Mrs Al Kawari allege that “by their error, they caused the deaths... by not taking into account the laws and regulations ... without providing the means of safety and security against fire”. They are also accused of running a nursery facility without the approval of the competent government authorities and without adhering to public health and safety conditions”. Five others, including mall management and one government official, are also facing charges.

Families of the deceased have reacted angrily to the delays, and the lack of information on the proceedings despite Qatar government promises of a full investigation immediately after the tragedy.

The delay in criminal proceedings has also meant that civil action for damages, crucial in particular for the welfare of the deceased teachers' families in the Philippines and South Africa, cannot move forward.

“Families of those who so sadly lost their lives deserve better than this. While nothing can bring their loved ones back, their suffering has been prolonged without good reason. Qatar is promoting itself as a global destination and a key international player, and it must be able to show the world that it has the will to prevent and avoid tragedies like this. Justice delayed is justice denied, and people need assurance that the law has no favourites. The government of Qatar must face up to its responsibilities,” said ITUC General Secretary Sharan Burrow.

Key points in the prosecution case include:

- The Qatari Authorities had known since 2007 that the illegal flammable materials that caused the fire to spread so rapidly were still used throughout the mall's construction. Yet

the Authorities continued to allow the mall to remain open, and to this day there is no confirmation those materials have been removed.

- For three years The Gympanzee nursery openly remained situated on the first floor of the mall, contrary to building regulations.
- The nursery was allowed to continue to operate without the relevant permits and safety inspections.
- The second fire door from the nursery was locked from the outside, which if unlocked could have allowed victims to escape.
- The Villagio Mall did not have sprinklers, proper fire-fighting or evacuation procedures, and the 'fire alarm' did not effectively alert people inside the mall to the danger.
- A diesel pump at the mall intended to deliver water for fire-fighting failed, having not been maintained by the mall owners or tested in line with regulations for many months prior to the fire.
- By the time fire-fighters finally obtained access to the Gympanzee nursery by cutting through the roof, those inside had perished.

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