Beat: News

Qatari diplomat among 5 convicted over deadly mall fire

-, 21.06.2013, 05:03 Time

USPA News - A court in Qatar on Thursday convicted five people, including one of the country`s diplomats, over a devastating fire last year that swept through one of the country`s fanciest shopping malls and killed 19 people, including thirteen children at a daycare center. The fire broke out at around 11 a.m. local time on May 28, 2012, at the Villaggio Mall in the Qatari capital of Doha.

Nineteen people, including thirteen young children, four adult teachers and two civil defense personnel, were killed in the blaze that was blamed on faulty wiring. A Doha court on Thursday convicted Sheikh Ali Bin Jasim Bin Thani Al Thani, who is a member of Qatar`s royal family and is currently the country`s ambassador to Belgium, Luxembourg and the European Union, of involuntary manslaughter for the lack of safety and protection at the mall`s nurse. The ambassador owned the Gympanzee nursery with his wife Iman Hamad Abdulaziz Al Kawari, who was also convicted of involuntary manslaughter. Both the couple, Villaggio Mall Chairman Abdul Aziz Mohammed Al-Rabban and Villaggio Mall Manager Tzoulios Tzouliou were sentenced to six years in prison. Mansour Nasir Fazzaa al-Shahwani, a Business and Trade Ministry employee who was responsible for giving the nursery its permit, was sentenced to five years in prison. Two others, Villaggio Mall Assistant Manager Rima Itani and Villaggio Mall Head of Security Ahmad Muhammad Abdul Rahman, were cleared of all charges. In a joint statement, the families of the victims killed in the nursery said they welcomed Thursday`s verdict, which is expected to be appealed by the defendants. "We welcome today`s initial verdict. We are pleased that the court has chosen to find five people responsible," they said. But the families said they were still waiting for answers and condemned the mall`s owners for re-opening the area that was destroyed by the fire. "The trial only gave us some answers. We still have more questions. To get these much needed answers, we call upon the State of Qatar to release the official report into the disaster," they said. "A simple request, that will help us all understand what went wrong." Villaggio Mall reopened a part of the complex that was destroyed in last year`s fire, but the families of the victims have blamed its owners for not having been able to visit the site. "Not once have we been shown the dignity to be able to grieve privately where out children were killed," they said, adding the mall`s management had shown no remorse. "They should be ashamed." When the fire broke out last year, police officers and a civil defense team arrived within two minutes after authorities received the first call. But responding firefighters were not made aware that there was a nursery inside the complex, and rescue workers instead focused on extinguishing the fire during the first 35 minutes. The thick smoke and high temperatures inside the mall made it difficult for firefighters to access the nursery, forcing them to access the nursery through the roof of the mall. The complex had no clear floor plans and witnesses said emergency exits were not visible and most of the sprinklers did not work due to a malfunction. Among the children who died in the fire were four Spanish children, a three-year-old French child, and New Zealand triplets. "Today is a day to remember. To remember the 19 innocent people, including 13 of our beautiful children, killed last year in Villaggio," the families added in their statement on Thursday. "Loved ones, who will never see justice. Loved ones, we miss more with every day that passes." Thanking people from around for their messages of support throughout the last year, they added: "We will now be taking further advice on the next steps available to us in the judicial process. We will not stop in our fight for justice. We will not stop in our fight for the truth. We will not stop in ensuring that this can never happen again."

Article online:
https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-1148/qatari-diplomat-among-5-convicted-over-deadly-mall-fire.html

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