

Faulty cables disrupting fire helpline, SHC told

Chief fire officer says there are only 14 functional fire tenders in Karachi, 30 out of order

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The Sindh High Court (SHC) directed the National Telecommunication Corporation (NTC) on Wednesday to repair faulty cables due to which the 16 helpline for reporting fire incidents remained dysfunctional.

A two-member bench, comprising Justice Muhammad Ali Mazhar and Justice Arshad Hussain Khan, issued the directive after the chief fire officer informed the court of the fault in cables, saying that they were damaged due to rain.

The bench was hearing a plea pertaining to the absence of firefighting arrangements in Karachi, which of is increased significance at this time of the year, given that the metropolis sees a rise in fire eruptions every winter, primarily due to dry weather.

The Karachi commissioner and the Civil Defence Department submitted their replies on the plea to the court.

In his reply, the commissioner stated that he had set up a control room for fire emergencies that would function round the clock. Citizens can report fire incidents to

the control room at 99205645 and seek assistance, he said in his reply, adding that the contact number of the control room would be advertised for public awareness.

Besides, Justice Mazhar questioned why no-objection certificates (NOCs) were issued for buildings lacking fire exits.

At this, Sindh Building Control Authority (SBCA) officials replied that they were working on the matter and improvements would be made soon.

Justice Mazhar then sought details about the issuance of the Building Safety Completion Certificate (BSCC) and was told that most people didn't bother getting the certificate.

Irked at the response, he remarked, "Accidents take place every other day in the city. Who will make arrangements to deal with them?" He added, "It will be a great deal even if a single mishap is prevented."

The court further stressed that the BSCC was not to be issued for any residential or commercial building unless all fire safety requirements were met.

It made this remark after a civil defence department of-

ficial told the court that the certificate wasn't acquired from the department in most cases before a building was occupied for residence.

The court replied that the department needed to be more stringent on the matter. "Otherwise, how will fire incidents be curbed?" it commented. "No building shall be occupied for residence in the absence of fire safety measures and same rule applies to factories."

The court also asked whether a single helpline set up by the commissioner would suffice to cater to the city's needs. "What happened to the 16 helpline [for reporting fire incidents]?" it asked.

The chief fire officer told the court that the helpline was dysfunctional as rain had damaged its cables. He further told the court that Karachi had 22 fire control rooms.

At this, Justice Mazhar asked for the number of fire control rooms in Sindh.

Expressing ignorance of this, the chief fire officer informed the court that 30 fire tenders of the fire department were out of order at present and the department had been managing operations with just 14 fire ten-

ders. "And 14 fire tenders are not enough for the city," he admitted, adding that each fire station needed at least four fire tenders.

Moreover, the petitioner maintained that a taskforce on fire safety would not have been formed had the court not intervened.

"But what measures have been taken by the taskforce for a city as large as Karachi?" the court enquired. "Who will inspect supermarkets, shopping centres, factories and other structures in the city [for fire safety arrangements] and through what process?"

Raising these questions, the court directed the NTC to repair the cables for 16 helpline. It also summoned the KMC municipal commissioner in a personal capacity at the next hearing and sought a report from the SBCA over the issuance of BSCC.

Furthermore, the court sought a report from Karachi commissioner on the 30 dysfunctional fire tenders in the city, directing him to submit the report at the next hearing. It also directed the taskforce to submit recommendations on fire safety within 15 days and adjourned the hearing until December 8.