

## 'I lost everything in my life': Doctor's courage as he buries his wife and five children following house fire

- **Fire ripped through family's home in Harlow, Essex last Monday**
- **Sole survivor Abdul Shakoor yesterday attended the funeral of his wife and five children who died in the blaze**
- **Tests at scene suggest blaze may have been started accidentally**

By Emily Andrews

His grief, as one family friend put it, is unimaginable.

But somehow, as he laid to rest his wife and all five of his children yesterday, Abdul Shakoor managed to fight tears long enough at least to try to put it into words.

Nine days after his entire family was killed in a fire at their home, Dr Shakoor described the devastation he felt at his 'irreparable loss'.



Sole survivor: Abdul Shakoor (centre with white shirt) walked hand in hand to the cemetery yesterday to say goodbye to his wife and five children who died in a house fire last week



Family funeral: Six funeral cars led the cortege for wife Sabah Usmani and children Hira, 12, Sohaib, 11, Muneeb, 9, Rayyan, 6, and Maheen, 3

His voice cracking, he told mourners: 'It is a shocking and heart breaking tragedy to myself, immediate family and close friends that within such a short period of time I lost everything in my life.'

Sabah Usmani, also a doctor, and four of the couple's children – Hira, 12, Sohaib, 11, Muneeb, nine, and Rayyan, six, – died in the fire in Harlow, Essex, in the early hours of Monday last week, despite Dr Shakoor's efforts to rescue them.

The fifth child, Maheen, three, was critically injured and clung to life for four days before dying in hospital. Dr Shakoor, 45, delivered his emotional tribute as hundreds turned out to pay their respects at the Harlow Islamic Centre yesterday. Afterwards, he had to be physically supported by relatives as he made his way to the cemetery.



Martyrs: The victims (from left) Hira, 12, Sohaib, 11, their mother Sabah Usmani, Rayyan, 6, Muneeb, 9 and Maheen, 3. At the service, the imam said those killed by fire die as martyrs



Saying goodbye: Dr Shakoor had to say goodbye to his family yesterday after he was discharged from hospital last Friday for smoke inhalation as he fought to save them



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With elders: As the funeral cars drove to the cemetery, Dr Shakoor (far right) walked with community elders as members of the public stood along the roadside to pay their tributes



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Six hearses: The funeral cars driving to the cemetery with the smallest, that of belonging to Maheen, who was due to celebrate her fourth birthday on Tuesday, and to Dr Usmani's coffin at the rear

He said: 'It would not have been possible for me to stand this time and face this reality without the guidance from the holy book of the Koran and from the personal life and teachings of the prophet Mohammed. 'I would like to express my thanks and gratitude to this community, hospitals and my colleagues and all institutions who have come forward like a family at this devastating time.' Poignantly, leading the cortege was the hearse containing the tiny casket of Maheen, who died just short of what would have been her fourth birthday. Then came her siblings in ascending age order. The children's mother Dr Usmani, 44, followed them.



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Many mourners: Some 400 mourners packed the Harlow Islamic Centre for the service as the imam said: 'We all belong to Allah. Whoever comes into this world has to also pass from this world'



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Left behind: Dr Shakoor (right) is assisted as he walks behind the hearses as one mourner dries his eyes (left)



Funeral procession: Community elders joined hundreds in their outpouring of grief at the funeral at the Harlow Islamic Centre



Pay their respect: Members of Essex County Fire and Rescue Service were among those in attendance at yesterday's service



Funeral cortege: The six funeral cars make their way to the cemetery. Police said that initial investigations shows that the fire took hold in the lounge room

Some 400 mourners packed the Islamic Centre, while more stood outside. Never before had the town seen so many coffins in one procession, the imam said.

The shoes of the mourners, left outside the mosque as Islam dictates, also told a story. Line after line was taken up by the heavy boots and hats of the emergency services – those firemen, paramedics and police officers who had all battled to save Dr Usmani and her children.

Classmates of the younger victims were also among those saying goodbye. One little boy, still in his school uniform of red jumper and grey trousers, shed a tear as his mother comforted him during the prayers.

Afterwards Dr Shakoor was supported by his brothers, who are also doctors, and his wife's family as they led the procession on foot to the nearby Parndon Wood Cemetery for a private burial.



Tragic accident: Essex Police initially suspected an arson attack but it is now thought 'increasingly likely' that the fire was a tragic accident

Mourners had come from all across the UK, America and Pakistan to attend, and members of the public lined the pavements during the 15 minute procession. Each coffin, topped with flowers, carried the words 'Victim of the Harlow Essex house fire', with the name and age of each one.

Parvez Hamed, a close friend of the family, said: 'What Dr Shakoor is going through is unimaginable and we all share his pain. We hope that [the funeral] can begin to bring some closure.'

Dr Shakoor – an endocrinologist and hospital registrar at Princess Alexandra Hospital – came to England with his family from Pakistan in 2009.

They moved to their rented three-bedroom home in Harlow just over a year ago. Police are still investigating the fire and have not ruled out arson, but it is now thought 'increasingly likely' that it was an accident. It is understood that the smoke alarm at the property was not working.