

## Did car-arson yobs start house fire which killed a doctor's wife and four children?

- **Huge blaze at house in Harlow, Essex, began in early hours of Monday**
- **Dr Abdul Shakoor suffered smoke inhalation as he tried to save his family**
- **Wife Sabah, sons Sohaib, 11, and Rayan, 6, and daughter Hira, 12, died**
- **Muneeb, 9, and Maheen, 3, taken to local hospital - but Muneeb later died**
- **Police still unsure of motive and say racism wasn't a problem in local area**
- **Neighbour's car was torched at the same time as the house fire**

By Emily Andrews

A doctor desperately battled to save his wife and four children as they were killed in a suspected arson attack at their family home.

At the same time as the house blaze, a neighbour's car was torched.

Police are investigating the theory that the five may have died at the hands of yobs who have attacked other cars on their estate.



Victims: From left Hira, 13, Sohaib, 11, their mother Sabah Usami, Rayan, six, and Muneeb, nine, all perished in the blaze. Three-year-old Maheen, on the far right, survived and is being treated in hospital



Couple: Doctor Abdul Shakoor survived with severe smoke inhalation while his wife Sabah Usmani died

Yesterday officers revealed how Abdul Shakoor, 45, 'fought hard' to rescue his family after an intense fire engulfed their end-of-terrace house as they slept.

His wife Sabah Usmani, also a qualified doctor, their sons Sohaib, 11, and Rayan, six, as well as 12-year-old daughter Hira perished in the blaze early yesterday.

Dr Shakoor, his third son Muneeb, nine, and daughter Maheen, three, were taken to the hospital where he works as a registrar.

The two children were later transferred to a burns unit, where Muneeb died.

Maheen remains in a critical condition, while Dr Shakoor is being treated for severe smoke inhalation and is 'utterly distraught'.

Police have launched a 'major crime investigation' while they try to establish whether the fire was deliberately started, and by whom.



Burned out: Special fire crews attend the scene of a major house fire in Barn Mead, Harlow, Essex



Tragedy: Four children died in the blaze, aged 13, 11, nine, and six. Fire damage can be seen at the back of the house, on the brickwork and the walls are black with smoke

Among various lines of inquiry is the theory that the Shakoor family were singled out because of issues within the local Muslim community, in which they were reportedly very popular.

Officers stressed, however, that there is no evidence of any racial motivation.

Another theory is that the Shakoors were not deliberately targeted, and the fire was either intended for previous tenants or started by arsonists who had attacked other cars on the estate.

Neighbours reported seeing as many as four people in the street beforehand, and said other vehicles had been previously targeted by arsonists in the area.

Firefighters were called to the Shakoors' rented house in Harlow, Essex, shortly before 2am yesterday.

They found flames pouring from both front and back doors and temperatures inside in excess of 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit. Nearby a Ford Focus was also on fire.

Neighbours told of 'horrible screams' and a woman calling for help from inside. Dr Shakoor had jumped from

the house to raise the alarm, then desperately tried to fight the flames to get back inside to rescue his family.



Blaze: Fire damage can be clearly seen at the upstairs window and smoke has stained the brickwork of the end-of-terraced property. It is not known how the fire started yet but it's being treated as suspicious



Remembered: Floral tributes laid at Barn Mead following a house fire in the street in Harlow, Essex, where a woman and four young children died and one other remains in hospital



'Lovely people': A note left with floral tributes at Barn Mead following a house fire on the Harlow street

Assistant Chief Constable Gary Beautridge, of Essex Police said: 'In the history of Essex Police, seldom has there been an incident of this gravity, in which five people, four of them children, have lost their lives.'

Ruling out any suggestion that Dr Shakoor was involved, he continued: 'I would like to stress that the father of these children was in the property at the time and fought hard to save his family in appalling conditions. 'He, as you would expect, is in severe shock. Our work with Dr Shakoor to establish some of the facts of this case will, inevitably, take time because of the emotional trauma he has suffered at the loss of his family.'



But he indicated that the answers to the mystery lay in the local community of Harlow, and appealed to anyone with information to come forward.

Chief fire officer David Johnson said the blaze, which started downstairs while the family was asleep upstairs, had developed rapidly suggesting some kind of fuel and accelerant may have been used.

The family are originally from Karachi, Pakistan, but had moved to the UK in 2009, first settling in Winchester and then moving to Harlow just over a year ago.

Both parents were doctors but while Dr Shakoor worked at the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Harlow as an endocrinologist and diabetes registrar, Dr Usmani cared for their children.



A white forensics tent is set up at the scene and a special fire sniffer dog can be seen with its handler



Two specialist fire officers discuss the blaze as the charred suitcase remains on the driveway





Probe: Essex Police Assistant Chief Constable Gary Beautridge (left) and Detective Superintendent Rob Vinson (right) speaking at a press conference at the force's headquarters in Chelmsford

Staff at the hospital were deeply shocked at the family's 'devastating loss'. Clinical director Dr Yvonne Barlow described the doctor as the 'kindest, gentlest person I have ever met'.

She added: 'He is universally respected and is an extremely popular member of staff.'

Dr Shakoor's cousin, Abdul Ishaqani, speaking from Karachi, said he did not believe the family had any enemies.



Belongings: A partially-burned suitcase on the ground outside the house while experts investigate the cause



Family home: The suitcase lays on the ground outside the house which has been cordoned off



Devastating: A close up view of an upstairs window with the glass missing and the frame is also charred



An aerial picture showing the scene at Barn Mead in Harlow after the blaze which has gutted the house



Gutted: Police seal off a neighbour's car which was torched at the same time that the blaze swept through Dr Shakoor's house





A sniffer dog works around the car at the scene on Monday - the car does not belong to the family



Police are treating the car fire as arson and it's seen being taken away on a recovery vehicle



The burnt-out car is wrapped in black sheets and removed from the scene of a fire

Mr Ishaqani said: 'They are a very happy, loving family. They still have a home in Karachi and visit regularly, but they were settled in Harlow and the children were doing very well at school.

'The last time I saw my cousin was three months ago when he came back to Pakistan.

'His mother had been staying in the UK with them for six months and he brought her home.

'We were told about the fire but we're still trying to find out what happened.'

Local couple Parvez Hamid, 43, and wife Safia Anwar, 38, were good friends with the Shakoors.



Police at the scene of the fire. Detectives believe the blaze could have been started with fuel



Investigation: Fire investigation officers arrive at the scene in Harlow to piece together how the fire started



Officials: The fire investigation officers wear red overalls as they begin their work. One neighbour said she heard 'horrible screaming' from the house and the sound of a woman screaming 'help'





He said: 'The family were amazing. They had only been living here for a while but in that time our two families became very close.

'Our kids used to play together and I always used to say how well behaved and polite they were. They were the model family.

'Abdul is a doctor and very academic. I've heard he jumped from a top storey to raise the alarm which sounds like him as he is that sort of person. He was very heroic.

'He and his wife adored their children and would do anything for them. My wife has been in tears all morning as she was best friends with her. The family are in our prayers and we just hope Maheen pulls through.'

Neighbours said all the boys loved cricket and attended nearby Abbotsweld primary school, while Rayyan would often be seen riding his bicycle near his home.

Family friend Jackie Lee said Dr Usmani was a 'lovely person', adding: 'Her eldest son and mine were friends and were playing together yesterday. It is so sad. They were a lovely family. Always smiling.'

A spokesman for Harlow Islamic Centre said they were working closely with police. They added: 'Dr Shakoor and his family were very much liked and respected in the local community.

'This loss of life will be felt throughout Harlow and the UK.'



Mystery: Firefighters look at the remains of the burnt-out silver Ford Focus found near the house



Fire: A burnt-out car is seen close to the fire-damaged house (right) in Barn Mead, Harlow, Essex which has now been cordoned off while police investigate the blaze.



Firefighters: Two fire engines can be seen at the scene of the blaze. The children's father suffered smoke inhalation. Police are treating the incident as suspicious and say fuel could have been used



Injuries: Princess Alexandra Hospital in Harlow where Abdul Shakour works and where he has been treated for minor injuries. His wife and four of his children died in the blaze