

Death toll from Surfside, Florida condo collapse climbs 64 as search for survivors winds down

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The death toll from the fatal collapse of the Champlain Towers South condo in Surfside, Florida rose to 64 Thursday, leaving 76 residents unaccounted for, according to Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava.

After two weeks of search operations to find those missing in the rubble, first responders paused their work briefly at 1:20 a.m. Thursday and held a moment of silence to honor the victims of the tragedy. No survivors have been found since the early hours after the collapse on June 24.

In light of the rising death count and inability to find survivors, authorities announced yesterday that the operation was being recategorized from a “search-and-rescue mission” to a “recovery effort,” meaning that there was little to no possibility of saving any additional lives. Rescue crews have said many victims were found in their beds, with the collapse proving to be one of the deadliest mass casualty building disasters in US history, not including fires or terrorist attacks.

During a news conference on Thursday, Surfside Mayor Charles Burkett called the latest developments “extremely tough.” He said the announcement of a shift from a search-and-rescue operation to a recovery effort was the result of a consensus by rescue teams that the chances of finding victims alive were “near zero.” The teams had been working continuously on 12-hour shifts, with assistance from search experts and crews from Mexico and Israel.

Miami-Dade County Fire Chief Alan Cominsky suggested Wednesday the “viability of life in the rubble” was low, while Mayor Cava told reporters authorities are “taking as much care as ever” to find remaining victims. She said authorities were working “around the clock” to bring closure to families and friends of those who have fallen victim to the collapse.

The toppling of the 12-storey condo has produced immense shock and sadness around the Miami-Dade community, as hundreds of residents have passed by the wreckage and visited vigils and shrines mourning those lost.

In the aftermath of the devastating collapse, fears have mounted that other condos and high-rises are incredibly vulnerable to the sort of structural failure witnessed in Surfside. Mayor Burkett sent a letter to condo associations citywide urging them to take steps ensuring their buildings are safe. In copies of the letter shared with the press, Burkett stated that building managers should retain engineers to review infrastructure drawings and perform basement reviews, regardless of age of the building.

The letter also included an advisory to inspect the foundations of buildings, a factor speculated to be centrally responsible for the collapse of the Champlain Towers South. Burkett declared the inspections were intended to give residents “some peace of mind” until forensic investigations on the causes of the Champlain Towers South collapse bring more information. Since the disaster, city and county officials have launched hundreds of inspections of residential condo buildings in the Miami area, and so far three have generated concerns.

In Miami-Dade County, inspections found at least one structural issue with three balconies. In Miami Beach, officials authorized the evacuation of a three-story building. The largest problem arose at a condo in North Miami Beach, where all 156 units of Crestview Towers South were evacuated last Friday after officials said the building was deemed structurally and electrically unsafe. Following the evacuations, an estimated 300 people were ordered to leave without forewarning and with no other place to live. The chairman of Miami-Dade Homeless Trust told CNN residents were told to grab what they can and simply “move along.”

More details have emerged as to the causes of the Champlain Towers South collapse, while scrutiny has shifted increasingly to the building association, with reports finding potential negligence on the part of officials. In a police report reviewed by CNN, a car crash had occurred in the building’s basement garage in 2016, resulting to visible

damage to a cement column. Damage to one of the building's columns has been one of the theories floated by engineers as a contributing factor to the collapse.

Although investigations thus far have not identified any single trigger for the collapse, countless reports have highlighted damage to the towers' structure, cracks in the concrete, and disputes over repair work as factors which worsened the condition of the building.

The incident in the garage has also accompanied theories highlighting more natural causes for the damage at the base of the building, including the dangerous effects of rising sea levels and climate change. The WSWS spoke this week to researcher Zhong-Ren Peng, a Professor/Director at iAdapt: International Center for Adaptation Planning and Design at the University of Florida, about some of these issues.

Dr. Peng placed stress on potential damage to the lower part of the structure as a reason for the collapse. "From what I gathered from the spalled concrete, it seemed the structure had not been repaired for a while and that the coastal area was a very corrosive environment," he said. He noted how the salty water/moisture getting into the concrete was producing cracks around the lower part of the building and the foundations, leading to the corrosion of steel reinforcement. While Peng had not visited the site for a more thorough examination, he said that the weakening of reinforcing steel over time was "likely" a major problem triggering the collapse.

Peng noted that when the steel in the concrete of a building weakens, it loses force and is therefore susceptible to breakage. "In order to hold the concrete together you need to have the steel inside to help keep the building stable," he said. Steel is also "very vulnerable to chemicals found in saltwater and when both substances come in contact, this produces rust," which can expand from the increasing flow of saltwater and cause more cracks and spalling in the concrete. "This attracts more saltwater into the cracks, and therefore into the steel. So this process goes on and on and on, and in the end the damage can be very severe, with the whole concrete and steel weakening."

Dr. Peng stressed the necessity of conducting repairs for buildings whose base can corrode easily. "That's why when you see cracks, you have to be very careful to repair it to prevent further damage." Dr. Peng's remarks echo the warnings of scientists who have sounded the alarm over human-induced climate change and its impact on coastal buildings.

The past three decades of rising seas and the corrosion of reinforced concrete has confirmed these warnings, raising fears that unless measures are taken to improve civil infrastructure, disasters like Champlain Towers South will become more common. Peng stressed the necessity for

increasing the standards for buildings and reexamining existing building codes along with taking greater precautions for future construction in vulnerable areas.

"I think that it's really important that we reexamine the efficacy of the building codes, while increasing the inspection and audits of existing buildings," he added. Peng noted that safety protocols and requirements for new construction needed to consider "not just hurricanes such as Hurricane Andrew back in 1992 but also sea level rise impact, and to address saltwater intrusion issues."

The past three decades have seen an explosion of high-rise construction and other condominiums along oceanfront regions, with many raising concerns that the motives behind such development are putting more lives at risk.

"There's a lot of demand for development in coastal areas, like beaches. So there's incentive for property owners and real estate businesses to conduct new development in these areas," Peng said. However, climate change has exacerbated the flood of water surrounding coastal buildings and, Peng noted, "Some areas will be inundated by rising seas in the future, as soon as next twenty, thirty or forty years," which will only increase the dangers for residents in these areas.

There are significant economic gains from real estate development in coastal areas, but Peng cautioned that "we need to think about what is most important here" due to the risk to human life involving such wide scale infrastructure development.

"Forty-years ago, there was an excuse for all this construction because we didn't know seas would rise so quickly," he continued, "but now we know that. Science has proven sea levels have been rising and that they will continue to rise. So the question is, should the government continue to give building permits to new developments in these coastal areas? If so, what adaptation measures should be required to ensure the safety of the building and residents 40 years later? That's a conversation that I hope we start to have given the collapse of the Surfside condo."



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