# Latvia: At least 54 dead in supermarket collapse

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At last count, a total of 54 people have died following the collapse of the roof of a large supermarket in the Latvian capital, Riga. Another 50 injured victims have been rescued from the rubble and taken to hospitals in the region. Many people remain missing.

Among the dead are three firefighters who lost their lives when a second part of the building collapsed. Latvian media have described the disaster as the worst tragedy since the country declared independence in 1991, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The number of casualties is set to exceed those in a ferry disaster in 1994 and the fire in a nursing home in 2007, which also claimed many lives.

The chairman of the State Child Welfare Office, Laila Rieksta-Riekstina, told the press that 16 children had lost parents, with three children losing both father and mother. Hundreds of people gathered in front of the collapsed shopping centre, laid flowers and lit candles for the dead.

A number of countries, including Russia and Poland, have offered the Latvian government aid in recovery efforts and in investigations into the cause of collapse. So far, the government in Riga has refused to take up the offers.

The collapse of the roof took place around 6 p.m. local time last Thursday at a peak shopping period, with several hundred people in the building. An area of the roof comprising around 500 square metres collapsed. According to those running the centre, the fire alarm went off about 10 times prior to the incident. Nevertheless, the building was not evacuated because there were “no obvious signs of fire.”

On Saturday, rescue workers continued to search the rubble for survivors, when further sections of the roof collapsed—this time without anyone being injured. The last victims to be recovered alive were rescued on Friday night. The more than 50 injured, some seriously, were delivered to clinics across Riga and its surroundings, with a public appeal made for blood donations.

The shopping centre had been erected just two years ago and according to the Latvian media had been renovated recently. The mayor of Riga instructed the authorities to review all projects under construction by the company that built the centre. In addition to large quantities of building materials, amounts of earth had also been bunkered on the roof—although, according to a city official, the roof was not designed to take such heavy loads. BBC News reported that another factor in the collapse may have been inadequate drainage from the roof, allowing large volumes of rainwater to accumulate.

Confirming that rapid and shoddy building methods were the most probable cause of the disaster, Latvian interior minister Rihards Kozlovskis told a local television station: “It is clear that there has been a problem with fulfillment of construction requirements.” The vice mayor of the capital, Andris Ameriks, told the Latvian news agency BNS that an explosion could have taken place prior to the collapse, but he gave no details. Prime Minister Valdis Dombrovskis convened his cabinet on Friday for a special meeting at which he announced plans to investigate the accident.

The department store was built by the Homburg Valda group, the Latvian subsidiary of the Canadian company, the Homburg International Group, and the construction company RE & RE. The shopping centre was run by the Maxima chain store consortium.

The Latvian media have reported that investigations into the cause of the accident will take some time. But the collapse of a two-year-old building, which was nominated for an architectural prize in 2011, suggests that corruption and spending cuts are among the causes.

Inhabitants of Riga expressed their concern at the levels of corruption and nepotism in the country. Taxi driver Arsenijs Smirnov told the AFP news agency: "It's probably the same old story—do it cheap and pocket the difference. But it is ordinary people who pay the real price."

Latvians have had bitter experiences with such cost-cutting measures in recent years. The country has been subjected to brutal austerity measures since the 2008 economic crisis, affecting mainly the public sector. Firefighters assisting at the Riga building collapse had to rely on support from soldiers because mass layoffs have left barely enough firemen for such a large-scale rescue operation. Since 2009, one third of all public employees in the country have been dismissed.

The hardest hit sector is the country's health service. The government has closed more than half of the 56 hospitals in the country, including its largest hospital with 650 beds. Following the draconian cuts in the health care system, adequate medical care is only possible via cash payment. Now, more than 25 percent of Latvians are estimated to lack any health insurance, and even those with insurance are expected to pay high sums for treatment by a doctor or in a clinic. Doctors and hospital staff are invariably overworked and, following a succession of wage cuts, often have a second or third job to make ends meet.

After harsh cuts to pensions, the average pension in Latvia amounts to about €80 (US$108) per month. Salaries in the public sector have declined since 2008 by 55 percent, with firefighters, emergency services staff and even doctors earning on average of between €200 and €350 per month. In addition, the state minimum wage has been slashed to €200, while the child allowance was halved.

In 2009, the economy collapsed by almost 25 percent and unemployment soared to around 21 percent. The country's budget deficit rose to 9.8 percent, and the inflation rate had already reached 15.6 percent in 2008. In 2009 and 2010, the government went on to cut public spending by 13 percent.

The cuts provoked a massive wave of emigration. Riga alone lost more than 100,000 people last year, and the country's population has declined by 10 percent since 2008. A similar development has taken place in neighboring Estonia and Lithuania, where deep austerity measures were also implemented.

The radical attacks on the living standards of the population in Latvia have won the praise of the European Union (EU) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), which have gone on to salute the right-wing government of Latvia. Just last month, the president of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, praised the brutal austerity measures that Latvia has undertaken to prepare for its entry into the eurozone.

"I am pleased that Latvia is strengthening its position in the heart of Europe with the introduction of the euro in the coming year," Draghi declared at a conference in the Latvian capital on Thursday. "The people here have shown a remarkable determination to overcome their difficulties and meet the criteria for adopting the euro," Draghi said. At the same time, Draghi called on the Latvian government to continue its "reform policy".

The austerity measures introduced following the 2008 economic crisis were used very deliberately to advance the country's entry into the eurozone. The accession treaty contains a clause specifying that the euro can be introduced as soon as Latvia fulfills its so-called convergence criteria.

Latvia is due to switch to the euro next year, although the majority of the population are against it. According to a survey by the SKDS market research company, only 22 percent of Latvia's population support the introduction of the European common currency. About 53 percent oppose it. Accession to the eurozone will invariably deepen the crisis in Latvia and lead to a rapid increase in prices, such as took place in neighboring Estonia after it introduced the euro in 2011.