

Two dead, one missing after hotel worksite collapses in New Orleans

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Two workers have died, one is still missing, and dozens have been hospitalized after the under-construction Hard Rock Hotel collapsed Saturday morning in New Orleans. The disaster occurred on Canal Street in the heart of the city's downtown, adjacent to the heavily trafficked French Quarter entertainment district.

The streets were immediately evacuated as the upper levels of the construction site came crashing down in a scene of chaos and pandemonium. More than 100 workers were on site at the time of the collapse, at least 30 of whom were sent to local hospitals, though with non-life-threatening injuries.

Construction worker Angel Oyuela described the scene to the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* newspaper. "I thought it was an earthquake that was taking us. All I thought about was death."

No official reason has been given for why the upper levels of the structure fell down in on themselves at approximately 9am. The New Orleans Fire Department Superintendent told reporters on Sunday that his team is "still in rescue mode" in regard to the worker still missing, adding "hopefully we get a rescue today." Search and rescue efforts are expected to continue into the night as the section of the collapsed building. At least three special engineers have been brought in, including one from Europe.

As of Sunday, search and rescue teams were still unable to locate the one remaining missing worker, though rescue officials claim to know where on site the person is likely located. A precariously leaning crane forced searchers to retreat until an additional crane could be brought in to prevent it from falling. Officials stressed the possibility of further collapses, as the structure remains unstable.

Several photos and videos appeared on social media

Saturday showing the panic and confusion during the collapse as dust and debris covered the street below. Police still have the area under lockdown as the cause of the accident is being investigated. Officials could not give a timeline on Sunday of just when the rescue and search efforts will be complete, or when nearby residents could return home and the streets surrounding could be reopened.

New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell spoke of the dangerous situation ongoing at the Canal St. disaster site. "We have more engineers coming in as we speak," she told reporters at a press conference Sunday morning,

"It's not safe right now. The area is unstable right now." The area remains under evacuation as at least 100 people were forced from their nearby homes due to the danger of further collapses.

The building site itself and its owners have a tumultuous history. The project, worth an estimated \$85 million, has gone through multiple parties and agencies over many decades. Since 2007 it has been under the ownership of the controversial Kailas Companies, a local real estate and development firm that bought the property for \$3.6 million.

In addition to its architectural value, the site was of historical significance, as it was once home to a branch of the famous Woolworths department store, whose segregated lunch counters were a focal point for sit-ins during the civil rights movement. The Woolworths in New Orleans was the site of the first sit-in demonstrations in the city in 1960.

Local conservationist groups took issue with Kailas' proposed plans to demolish the existing structure and build a much larger, taller complex of condos and retail spaces. At 200 feet tall, the proposed project far exceeded the 70 feet allowed by local zoning rules.

However, several local developers and business owners held a series of meetings and convinced the City Council to approve the project.

Not long after, Praveen Kailas pleaded guilty to overbilling the state on some rental properties he managed as part of Louisiana's Road Home Program, a state program meant to assist displaced families after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005. Nevertheless, his family's company retained control of the property and continued with the project despite protests from preservationists over its scale and potential impact to nearby historical sites such as the historic Saenger Theater.

In September, members of the local electricians union held a protest at the site for using "unlicensed and unqualified electricians, against city ordinances," and for miscategorizing the workers on site as contract workers, a common corporate tactic used to avoid paying benefits to workers, thus leaving them underinsured and minimally protected against workplace injuries and unsafe labor practices.

The disaster in New Orleans is only the latest in a series of construction crane collapses throughout the United States. In June, a crane collapsed during heavy winds and thunderstorms in downtown Dallas, Texas. It was sent careening into an adjacent apartment complex, where it killed one and hospitalized six. The crane collapsed even though the winds were well below the 140 miles-per-hour safety limit for which construction cranes are rated, according to an expert who spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*.

In April, a crane collapse in Seattle, Washington killed four people, including a mother and her 5-month-old daughter.



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