

Five dead in Minneapolis, Minnesota high-rise fire

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At least five people were killed and four injured by a fast-moving fire in a high-rise public housing complex in Minneapolis, Minnesota in the early morning hours on Wednesday. The fire originated on the 14th floor of Cedar High Apartments, a 25-story building in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, across the Mississippi River from the main campus of the University of Minnesota and about one mile east of the downtown area. The high-rise buildings in the area are a well-known sight in the downtown area and from the nearby highways.

The neighborhood, on the West Bank of the river, is often called Little Mogadishu because of the high percentage of Somali immigrants who live there. Four of the five victims of the tragedy were Somali. They included three elderly women, Maryam Mohamed Mohamud, 69, Nadifa Mohamud, 67, and Amatala Shadam, 78. A Somali man was also among the dead, along with 59-year-old Jerome Stuart. Four of the victims were pronounced dead at the scene, and one died later in the hospital. According to the coroner's office, all succumbed to smoke inhalation.

The blaze, which broke out at about 4 AM, was brought under control within about 30 minutes of the arrival of Minneapolis firefighters, but that does not give an accurate picture of its force and deadly consequences. Minneapolis fire chief John Fruetel said the fire had had "a good head start" by the time the department arrived, and that the firefighters faced an "extreme environment of heat and wind-driven fire." He added, as reported by the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, that it was hard to describe "how precarious that scene was for those firefighters."

The building, on Cedar Avenue, was constructed 50 years ago, in 1969. Its 191 units consist only of one-bedroom and studio apartments, and its residents are

mainly immigrant and elderly. Abdi Warsame, who represents the area on the Minneapolis City Council, said that many of the residents were people with disabilities. The high-rise buildings in the area are designated as affordable housing for the poor, and half of the units are for residents who are eligible for Section 8 federal housing vouchers.

Fire Chief Fruetel said that the cause of the fire appeared to be accidental, but added that further investigation would take time. A fire with multiple fatalities in a high-rise building recalls the man-made atrocity of Grenfell Towers in London, where over 70 people lost their lives about two-and-a-half years ago because of the criminal negligence of the local authorities, who used flammable and toxic cladding that quickly turned the tower into a death trap when a fire began. While no such instance of wanton criminality was evident in this case, the results of an investigation will be awaited by the families of the victims, as well as other workers.

The Cedar High building contained partial sprinkler coverage on the main floor and in the mechanical equipment rooms, but not on the rest of the floors. Sprinklers are not mandatory in older buildings such as the one in which the fire took place.

While the building was part of the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority (MPHA), it was managed by the federal department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), which was responsible for periodic inspections. According to one report, the building was last inspected in February 2015, and received a score of "95 out of 100," with no explanation provided of how these points were awarded. The city housing authority is responsible for following up on specific complaints, and there have been reports of multiple complaints in recent years,

including hazardous conditions, broken elevators, and, most ominously, the condition of fire alarms and inadequate maintenance of fire extinguishers and kitchen ventilation. The MPHA claimed to have rapidly addressed these concerns.

There have been at least a half dozen house fires in Minneapolis leading to multiple deaths in the last decade. The Cedar-Riverside neighborhood has a recent history of deadly fires in cold weather. On January 1, 2014, a fire destroyed a ten-unit apartment building in the neighborhood, leading to multiple injuries and three deaths.



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