

Remaining portion of collapsed Surfside, Florida condo demolished as search for victims continues

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5 July 2021

Search and rescue operations continued in Surfside, Florida over the weekend as the total death count from the collapse of the Champlain Towers South condo on June 24 rose to 27, with three additional bodies discovered late Sunday night. As of Monday, 118 people remained unaccounted for, according to Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava.

The search for surviving victims resumed after the remaining portion of the building was demolished Sunday night. Officials moved quickly to take down the standing portion of the precarious condominium due to concerns that the rest of the structure was at risk of failing, endangering the lives of rescue crew. Demolition specialists drilled holes and began laying explosives in them Sunday afternoon as they prepared to bring down the fragile building.

A Tropical Storm Watch was also put in place in South Florida because of the looming threat of Storm Elsa, which was downgraded Saturday from a Category 1 hurricane to a tropical storm with maximum sustained winds. The looming storm prompted worry over the safety of search crews and that the other portions would collapse because of inclement weather. Surfside's Mayor Charles Burkett said Sunday night the storm "may have been a blessing in disguise" because it led to preparations for taking down the rest of the building.

The structure was demolished around 10:30 p.m. Sunday using a method called "energetic felling," described as a process that uses small, strategically placed explosives and relies on gravity to bring the building down in place. According to Mayor Cava, the demolition was carried out "exactly as planned." Cava called the decision to bring the building down "critical" for expanding the scope of the search. The demolition has allowed the crew to access the area closest to the building that they had not been able to access before.

Fears mounted among relatives on Saturday after hearing of a suspension of the rescue effort for demolition preparations. In a livestream video that was broadcast on social media, one relative was heard calling the pause for the search "devastating." She asked whether rescuers could at least work the perimeter of the site so as not "to stop the operation for so many painful hours."

Moreover, the circumstances surrounding the search mission have grown increasingly daunting after more than a week of extraordinary complications. The building collapsed in layers, making it extremely difficult to tunnel through without putting rescuers at incredible risk. Workers were forced to pause for at least 12 hours on Thursday over concerns about the stability of the building and the rubble where they had been searching, a decision that proved very frustrating for the workers and loved ones of victims.

Although search teams continued their efforts following the demolition, it is increasingly clear that there are no more survivors to be found from the horrific collapse, with nearly 150 victims, making it one of the deadliest infrastructure failures in American history. This painful reality was spelled out bluntly by Israeli Colonel Golan Vach, a search-and-rescue expert, who said in an interview Sunday with WPLG Local 10 that he no longer believed there were any survivors under the rubble.

Vach, who has been at the forefront of efforts to save those trapped in debris, explained circumstances during the preceding few days led him to believe chances of finding survivors are extremely low. "We are trying to be hopeful, but realistic at the same time," Vach said, regarding his discussions with the families of the victims.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to residents and mourners who visited the Wall of Hope & Memorial, a place where those closest to victims and missing persons have come to mourn over the massive loss of life. "I can't believe it, this is unacceptable," Luca said. "I had three friends that died in this tragedy. I can't believe that this building just fell without somebody knowing something about the fact that it was weak."

Tatyana noted, "I keep hearing from people that they can't believe this has happened," before stating that the building's management and political officials swept known structural dangers under the rug. "The people that were in charge of this building knew what was going on and didn't want to pay for repairs." She continued, "I keep telling my friends that this disaster happened because of the neglect of the owners of the building."

Meanwhile, new revelations have emerged of the possible causes of the sudden collapse. While the investigation is in its initial stages, evidence points to careless alterations over the building's original design which may have undermined the structure's integrity. Engineers who visited and explored the wrecked site Sunday noted possible flaws in the foundations of the building.

Critical areas near the base of the condo appeared to use less steel reinforcement than called for in the project's design template before construction had begun. Allyn E. Kilsheimer, a forensic engineering expert, told the *New York Times* the investigation had confirmed there were signs that the amount of steel rebar used to connect concrete slabs to the building's columns might be less than what the project's initial plans specified.

While further inspections are needed to assess the rubble, photos published by the *Times* appear to show that a significant array of bars holding up the condo were not arranged according to the original drawings, as slab-to-column connections seemed to contain less steel than expected.

Those columns were part of an exterior deck that served as a ground-level parking spot adjacent to the pool area. Two witnesses have already said they saw part of the deck collapse in the minutes before the entire building went down. In the Champlain Tower's original 1979 drawings, the vertical columns in many parts of the condo were supposed to provide a critical connection to horizontal slabs, joined together with eight rods of reinforcing steel near the tops of the slab. But the reinforcing rods in the parking area appear to have been fewer in number, a sign that insufficient support was authorized for the building's construction.

On the front end of the exposed slab, only two pieces of reinforcing steel, or "rebar," can be seen, half of what would be expected, while three bars are visible on the other side of the slab, instead of there being four on each side. Kilsheimer cautioned, however, that it is common in construction work for the final product to differ from drawn designs, before noting more analysis would be needed to assess whether the amount of steel reinforcement used was even a factor in the collapse.

The discovery of possible reinforcement inconsistencies adds to other reports in the media referencing a 2018 engineering inspection analyzing the stability of the condo, which warned ominously of serious damages as a result of the breakage of concrete at the tower's base. The 2018 report made reference to "existing design flaws" in the building's foundations, including a concrete slab which was installed improperly, severely undermining its waterproofing.

Despite the engineering examination issuing major flag notices for an infrastructure failure, a town official had brushed these dire warnings aside and informed residents that nothing serious was wrong with the building. According to the documentary record of a meeting between Surfside building inspector Ross Prieto and condo association board members,

Prieto had told the board the building was "in very good shape" after reviewing the damning engineering report.

The collapse in Surfside has raised many alarm bells pertaining to other buildings vulnerable to structural damage across Miami's coastline. Miami Beach mayor Dan Gelber told CNN yesterday approximately 507 buildings in the area went through their 40-year recertification process within a week, declaring "none of them had any structural issues." This blanket statement has already raised severe skepticism, with not a small number of people on social media doubting the efficacy of so many inspections being seriously conducted in just a week.

On Friday, the city of North Miami Beach ordered the 156-unit Crestview Towers Condominium to be immediately closed and the evacuation of its more than 300 residents. While details on what specifically prompted the evacuation haven't been released, the building reported millions of dollars in damage from 2017's Hurricane Irma.

The tragedy in Surfside has driven the political establishment and local officials into damage control following years of careless neglect over inspections and maintenance for other buildings and high-rises in South Florida, with evidence mounting of building regulations being improperly enforced and buildings existing with little to no consistent oversight.

Miami-Dade County officials announced last week that they were reviewing twenty-four multistory buildings that either had failed major structural or electrical inspections required after 40 years or had not submitted any reports in the first place. According to the county's own records, however, 17 of those cases had been open for necessary inspections for at least a year. The oldest case had sat unresolved since 2008.

Moreover, local governments are following an arbitrary approach to identifying other potentially unsafe buildings across the region, as the age and height criteria that would prompt added scrutiny has varied from one location to the next. Officials from the village of Key Biscayne, a barrier island off the coast of Miami, have opted to conduct no further inspections in the wake of the disaster in Surfside.



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