

Florida officials stonewall forensic engineers as final victim is named in Surfside condo collapse

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28 July 2021

The final victim of the sudden, horrifying collapse of the Champlain Towers South condo building in Surfside, Florida, was named Monday bringing to a close the agonizing, month-long search for survivors and remains that riveted viewers around the world before it disappeared from the major networks and was shunted to the back pages of the major newspapers.

Positive identification of the pulverized remains of Estelle Hedaya raised the death count to 98, making it one of the deadliest structural disasters in US history. Hedaya's family held a traditional Jewish memorial for her on Tuesday in New York City.

Roughly half of the building pancaked into the shoreline at 1:25 a.m. on June 24, crushing residents as they slept in their beds. The dead range in age from 1 to 92.

The announcement of Hedaya's identification by Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava marked the effective end of the month-long search and recovery operation by dozens of area firefighters and other first responders from across the country and internationally. The mayor said she was especially proud that "we were able, at last, to bring closure to all those who reported missing loved ones."

It was "the largest non-hurricane related emergency response in the history of our state," Levine Cava noted.

But the causes of the collapse and the potential role of criminal negligence, over the course of the forty-year history of the building from its original construction, through various inspections, reports, repairs and omitted repairs to the ultimate death trap, remain undetermined. These issues make Levine Cava's rejection of the customary procedures to be

implemented in the aftermath of almost every other such disaster somewhat suspect.

The mayor of Miami-Dade County has adamantly refused to give expert forensic engineers access to the site or to any of the more than 18 million pounds of concrete that have been removed from the site and stored nearby. On the contrary, even the forensic engineers' request to see drone footage of the site was returned, "request denied."

Powerful financial and political interests seem to be moving behind the scenes to choreograph and control every step in the discovery and release of answers to the big questions that hang over the investigation. Before the last human remains were extracted from the pile of rubble, financial speculators had an offer of \$100 million dollars on the table to acquire the prime beach-front property.

Florida State Attorney Katherine Fernandez Rundle acknowledged Monday that there had been "multiple requests by engineers and attorneys" to gain access to the site. "Engineers from the federal agency National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) were deployed to Surfside with Congressional authority to gather evidence and determine how and why the Champlain South Tower collapsed. NIST is the fact-finding agency responsible for investigating building collapses such as the World Trade Center, much like the NTSB investigates plane crashes," she said in a statement.

"It is my understanding that once NIST, the Miami-Dade Fire Rescue and Miami-Dade Police Departments determine that it is safe and appropriate for others to gain access to the site, they will be permitted to do so under guidelines set forth by those agencies," Rundle

concluded.

The only problem with the process outlined by Rundle is that NIST is notorious for conducting years-long inquiries before publishing any findings. And Miami-Dade Police, which is leading a homicide investigation into the collapse, said in a statement Tuesday that the department is still, a full five weeks after the disaster, “in the process of procuring a forensic engineer.”

The forensic engineer hired by the town of Surfside to investigate the collapse, Allyn Kilsheimer, has so far been blocked from examining the site and the concrete slabs from the tower which are being stored in a warehouse nearby.

Kilsheimer told the *World Socialist Web Site* that during more than five decades of conducting such investigations, including sites of high national security significance, such as the Pentagon after 9/11, he has never before been denied access to a site or to materials. “I am going to leave at the end of this week,” he said, “because I can’t do the investigations at the site and the two storage facilities that I need to do.”

“Obviously, I am very frustrated,” he continued. “I don’t understand who is making those decisions and how. I hear that the scene is considered a crime scene by the Miami-Dade Police and I appreciate that. I do not quite understand, although I am not a crime scene expert, what is still down at the site that is still evidence and why I could not be there doing that.”

Kilsheimer said it was urgent to determine the causes of the tragedy because another tower on the coast may be threatened by similar conditions.

A letter from Surfside Mayor Charles Burkett to Levine Cava last Friday emphatically repeats Kilsheimer’s concerns and called on the county to allow the town’s engineers access but this demand has so far been rebuffed.

“We want to make it absolutely clear that we object to being denied access to the site in order to conduct what we believe are urgent emergency structural and foundation investigations which may prevent another imminent building collapse in our Town,” Burkett wrote.

“THE SAFETY OF THE RESIDENTS LIVING IN THE CHAMPLAIN TOWERS NORTH BUILDING AND OTHER OCEAN FRONT BUILDINGS MUST NOT BE IGNORED, NOR CAN ACTION TO

PROTECT THEM BE DELAYED ANY LONGER,” his letter emphatically stated.

Burkett was referring to Champlain Towers North, the sister condo complex that was built at the same time as Champlain Towers South by the same developer.

In a related development, Eleventh Judicial Circuit Court Judge Michael Hanzman, who is overseeing the civil lawsuits, declared that “victims who have lost their homes, their personal belongings, and in many cases their lives are not going to be sacrificing the value of their real estate for the public good.”

Hanzman was speaking during a public hearing last Wednesday regarding demands that the site of the collapse should be turned into a memorial and not sold off. The judge declared that his job is to guarantee that victims get what they are entitled to and that survivors and the families of victims will not be asked to donate their property.

“Regardless of the views of some people who are not victims, this court’s task and your task is to compensate the victims of this tragedy, period,” Hanzman told attorneys at the hearing.



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