

More Than 24 Bodies Found After Oakland Fire

Recovery teams have found 24 bodies in the charred ruins of an Oakland, California loft building after a fire broke out during a weekend dance party, and the death toll is expected to rise, authorities said on Sunday.

Sergeant Ray Kelly, a spokesman for the Alameda County Sheriff's Office, said two dozen bodies were located as authorities sifted through the debris-filled shell of the two-story building, which was used by an artists' collective.

He told a press briefing that the death toll would likely rise in what fire officials called the deadliest blaze in the city's history. He said the names of the victims would be released "in the coming hours" after their families were notified.

"In regards to the amount of people that are still missing, yes, it's a significant number, Kelly said.

"We've given you a number of 24," he said, referring to the dead. "That number will go up."

Only 20 percent of the building had been searched in the past 12 hours, said Melinda Drayton, battalion chief at the Oakland Fire Department. She said the origin of the fire had yet to be determined and the cause was still unknown.

The recovery operation had been delayed for hours until workers could enter safely. The roof had collapsed onto the second floor and in some spots, the second story had fallen onto the first.

Firefighters have gone through the building searching the debris, "bucket by bucket," Drayton said .

"It was quiet, it was heartbreaking," she said, referring to the search. "This will be a long and arduous process."

The warehouse, which served as a base for the Ghost Ship Artists Collective, was one of many converted lofts in the city's Fruitvale district, a mostly Latino area where rents are generally lower than in the rest of Oakland.

Many of the victims were believed to be in their 20s and 30s, and the fire sent ripples of anxiety through the Bay Area's large art and music community.

"I am still in disbelief, but I hope my friends who were in the Oakland Ghost Ship fire and are still unaccounted for are okay," Joanna Blanche Lioce, a bartender at Bottom of the Hill, a popular music venue in San Francisco, wrote on Facebook.

The fire erupted at about 11:30 p.m. PST on Friday (0730 GMT Saturday) during the party featuring electronic dance music that dozens of people attended.

Authorities had said on Saturday that about 25 people were believed to be missing, but on Sunday, officials did not provide a specific number.

Police started searching outside of the fire scene in an effort to identify victims, focusing on cars parked near the venue that might belong to those who attended the party, Oakland Police Department spokeswoman Johnna Watson said.

"Last night, Oakland police officers did what we call an area wide search," she said. "They looked at all of the parked vehicles, gathered license plate numbers for any of the victims that may have driven to this location," she said on Sunday.

Authorities said they did not suspect arson, but investigators want to find out if the building had a history of code

violations.

Photos of the “Ghost Ship” venue posted online showed a space brimming with an elaborate array of musical instruments, religious statues and antiques and furnished with eclectic mix of overstuffed sofas and colorful carpets. The interior featured a maze of side rooms and nooks.

“The whole place was built like you are going to set up for a fire,” said Matt Hummel, 46, who has worked in construction and helped renovate other warehouse spaces for artists.

Hummel said the building had bedrooms and workspace and the uneven stairs to the second floor were like “climbing a fort.”

The party was taking place on the second floor of the building, which had just two exits, officials said. There was no evidence of any smoke detectors or sprinklers, officials said.

The city had received complaints about “blight” and construction without permits inside the building and opened an investigation. An inspector was able to verify the “blight” complaint by observing piles of debris outside, but failed to gain access to verify the construction complaint, the city said in a statement. The inquiry remained open, it added.

The statement said the building was designated for use as a warehouse only.

The city was aware of reports that people were living there, but no permits had been issued for that purpose, Darin Ranelletti, the city’s buildings and planning chief, said on Saturday. It was unclear, he said, whether special permits would be needed for the artists who had worked inside. {eoa}

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