

Fire chief tells families of the 159 people unaccounted for after a Florida building collapse to have hope

(CNN)The fire chief helping to lead search and rescue efforts at the South Florida building collapse that killed at least four people had a message Friday for the families of the 159 others unaccounted for.

Have hope.

"There's always hope," Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Chief Andy Alvarez said as he choked up in an interview with CNN's Wolf Blitzer. "We're doing everything we can to bring your family member out alive."

Alvarez said the rescue efforts rank among the most dangerous he's ever been a part of. Concrete is falling around some team members as they cut into walls trying to find ways into the voids in the rubble.

Meanwhile, some family members wait at a reunification center. Some have given DNA samples in case they are needed to help identify victims.

Jason Pizzo, a state senator, said he has been talking with anxious relatives.

"It's absolute desperation; it's devastation. It's still being called search and rescue," he said, but when families see the rubble, it seems like no one is listening. "They just want to see some sort of movement."

Three bodies were found overnight from Thursday into Friday in the wreckage of Champlain Towers South in Surfside, Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Assistant Fire Chief Raide Jadallah said — adding to one found early Thursday.

The medical examiner's office identified Stacie Fang as a victim killed in the collapse. Fang is the mother of Jonah Handler, a boy who was pulled alive from the rubble, her family said in a statement.

"There are no words to describe the tragic loss of our beloved Stacie," the Fang and Handler family statement said. "The members of the Fang and Handler family would like to express our deepest appreciation for the outpouring of sympathy, compassion, and support we have received. The many heartfelt words of encouragement and love have served as a much-needed source of strength during this devastating time."

The number of people unaccounted for is 159, Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava told reporters Friday — up from the figure of 99 that officials gave Thursday afternoon.

Those 159 people “have been identified as possibly being on the site,” the mayor said at a news conference Friday afternoon in Surfside. “So those are people that maybe live there, but we don’t know whether they were there at the time.”

Dr. Howard Lieberman, a trauma surgeon with the Miami-Dade Fire Rescue Urban Search & Rescue Task Force, told CNN that crews on Thursday “did hear some tapping, there was some noise,” adding that the tapping kept up for a while and then, over the course of the day, “dissipated.”

According to Lieberman, the search effort has been very emotional, as teams find personal effects in the rubble.

“We’re seeing stuffed animals, teddy bears, boxed of diapers, a child’s bunk bed, and we’re finding a lot of pictures, family pictures, and it’s, it’s a little bit more emotional than going somewhere, where you know there’s no one, let’s say for a hurricane where they had enough warning and they had evacuation time and they got out.”

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis at the news conference emphasized the importance of finding out the cause of the collapse.

“We need a definitive explanation for how this could have happened,” DeSantis said. “We don’t want to get [it] wrong, obviously, but at the same time I do think it’s important that it’s timely because you have a lot of families here, you have families that lost loved ones ... you have other folks who were able to get out safely, but then lost their homes.”

Three of the four victims have been identified, according to Dr. Emma Lew, director of the Miami-Dade County Medical Examiner Department. One victim died at a hospital. No other information was provided.

About 55 of the 136 units at the building a few miles north of Miami Beach collapsed at around 1:30 a.m. Thursday, leaving huge piles of rubble on the ground and materials dangling from what remained of the structure, officials said. Thirty-five people were rescued from standing portions of the building by first responders, Jadallah said Thursday.

Numerous search and rescue personnel have been scouring the rubble, including from the surface, with search dogs, sonar, and cameras.

Structural engineers also have been shoring up other places — such as areas near a parking garage underneath the rubble — to allow crews to tunnel underneath with light machinery.

Source:

<https://www.cnn.com/2021/06/25/us/building-collapse-miami-friday/index.html>

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