Beat: News

At Least 44 Dead, More Than 250 Missing

In Hong Kong High-Rise Complex Fire

Halifax, Nova Scotia, 27.11.2025, 18:31 Time

USPA NEWS - A catastrophic fire swept through a Hong Kong high-rise community , leaving at least 44 people dead and 279 reported missing. Operations to rescue residents trapped in burning high-rise apartment buildings continued into the morning.

According to the Associated Press,
several local news outlets reported that law enforcement officials had apprehended three individuals on suspicion of manslaughter in connection with a fire that broke out Wednesday afternoon in the Tai Po district, a suburb in the New Territories. By Thursday morning local time, the fire remained unextinguished, with rescue efforts ongoing and the death toll reaching 44.

A massive evacuation effort was undertaken as the fire spread across seven of the complex's eight buildings, resulting in the hospitalization of at least 29 individuals. As night descended, windows emitted bright flames and smoke. Authorities indicated that investigators would scrutinize factors including the compliance of exterior wall materials in high-rise buildings with fire resistance standards, in light of the fire's unusually rapid propagation. Director of Fire Services Andy Yeung disclosed that officers discovered foam sheets with high flammability.

The fire, as stated by officials, commenced on the external scaffolding of one of the buildings, a 32-story tower, and then propagated internally and to adjacent buildings, likely assisted by windy conditions.

Chinese leader Xi Jinping on Wednesday extended condolences to the family of the firefighter who died and offered sympathies to the families of the victims.

The residential complex comprising eight buildings with nearly 2,000 apartments, housing approximately 4,800 residents, including a significant number of elderly individuals, was affected by this major fire. Constructed in the 1980s, the complex had been undergoing significant renovations prior to the incident. Fire officials reported that extreme temperatures at the scene hindered rescue efforts. A massive column of flames and dense smoke billowed as the fire spread rapidly via bamboo scaffolding and construction netting surrounding the exterior of the buildings. Approximately 900 individuals were evacuated to temporary shelters. Authorities deployed hundreds of firefighters, police officers, and paramedics to the scene. Firefighters utilized ladder trucks to direct water at the intense flames from elevated positions. The fire, which commenced mid-afternoon, was elevated to a level 5 alarm, the highest severity level as night fell.
The fire, which engulfed three buildings, was reportedly "coming under control" shortly after midnight, according to the Fire Services Department.

Authorities stated that conditions remained extremely challenging for firefighters. “Debris and scaffolding from the affected buildings are falling down,” noted Derek Armstrong Chan, Deputy Director of Fire Service Operations. “The temperature inside the concerned buildings is extremely high, making it difficult for us to enter the building and ascend to conduct firefighting and rescue operations.” The fire department indicated that it received numerous calls requesting assistance, with some residents remaining trapped as of Wednesday night. Firefighters deployed approximately 200 fire trucks and over 100 ambulances to the scene, according to RTHK, the local public broadcasting service.

A courageous 37-year-old firefighter tragically lost his life, while another firefighter is bravely recovering from heat exhaustion, said Yeung, the director of fire services. District officials in Tai Po have opened temporary shelters for people left homeless by the fire, offering them a beacon of hope.

The fire is the deadliest in Hong Kong in years. In November 1996, 41 people died in a commercial building in Kowloon in a level 5 fire that lasted for approximately 20 hours.

From Nova Scotia, Canada, Halifax Regional Fire and Emergency sent the following message;

"We are deeply saddened by the lives lost in the devastating apartment complex fire in Hong Kong this week. Our heartfelt condolences go out to all who are grieving or still waiting for news of missing loved ones. We also hold in our thoughts the first responders on scene, and firefighter Ho Wai-ho who died in the line of duty."

Article online:
https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-26289/at-least-44-dead-more-than-250-missing.html

Editorial office and responsibility:
V.i.S.d.P. & Sect. 6 MDStV (German Interstate Media Services Agreement): Brian Teepell, USPA 24 News

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Official Federal Reg. No. 7442619