

Death Toll Surges After Blaze Ravages Kazan Shopping Mall

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Firefighters extinguishing a blaze that tore through one of Kazan's largest shopping malls Wednesday afternoon.

The number of lives claimed by a fire that engulfed a Kazan shopping mall last week has soared to 17, the regional branch of Russia's Emergency Situations Ministry said in a statement Saturday.

A blaze broke out in Kazan's Admiral shopping center last Wednesday, reducing what used to be a behemoth structure in the city center to a pile of ash and rubble.

The next day, regional Emergency Situations Ministry officials announced that the fire had killed five people and that the whereabouts of 25 others thought to have been at the mall at the time of the incident remained unknown.

By Sunday, the bodies of 14 victims, including eight foreign nationals, had been identified

at medical facilities in Kazan, the capital of Russia's republic of Tatarstan.

The body of lieutenant colonel Sergei Kostin — deputy head of Tatarstan's fire service, who had gone missing Wednesday while searching for victims — was recovered from the wreckage on Friday, the Emergency Situations Ministry reported.

Tatarstan President Rustam Minnikhanov, who decreed a republic-wide day of mourning on Saturday, announced last week that the families of each of the Russian citizens among the victims would receive 1 million rubles (\$16,000) in compensation. For the foreign victims, he vowed that the regional budget would cover the cost of transporting their remains to their home countries.

More than 1,000 rescue workers were still on the scene as of Sunday morning, clearing the 13,500 square meters of rubble left on the scene, the regional branch of the Emergency Situations Ministry said in a statement.

Investigators have yet to determine the cause of the fire. TASS news agency reported that various theories were being probed: issues with electrical wiring, arson, improper use of fire and a series of general fire safety violations.

Meanwhile, several individuals linked to the mall have been taken into custody or placed on wanted lists in connection with the ongoing investigation.

Robert Khairullin, the mall's director, has been taken into police custody, the TASS news agency reported Sunday, citing a regional representative of the Investigative Committee. Investigators are also reportedly searching for billionaire Alexei Syomin, the owner of the facility.

The regional branch of Russia's Investigative Committee announced Saturday that it had added Minzilya Safina, the 25-year-old former bailiff, to a wanted list for failure to enforce a regional court's 2013 decision to rectify the shopping center's numerous fire safety violations.

Investigators also announced that shopping mall manager Guseyn Gakhramanov and his deputy Nikolai Kayekin have been taken into custody.

Under Russian law, individuals found guilty of fire safety violations that result in fatalities can face up to five years in prison.

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