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Rescuers End Search at Magnitogorsk Building Collapse Site, Final Death Toll 39

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Ilya Moskovets / TASS

Thirty-nine people have been killed in an apartment building collapse this week in the industrial Russian city of Magnitogorsk as emergency workers wrapped up a search operation.

The casualty count has progressively increased since the 10-story building fell on Dec. 31 in what the authorities described as a gas explosion. In a separate incident the next day that was also attributed to gas, a minibus explosion on the same street killed three unidentified people.

As of Thursday evening, rescuers have recovered 39 bodies from the rubble and said there were no more to be found.

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“The last body was retrieved half an hour ago. The search and rescue operation is complete,” Deputy Emergency Situations Minister Alexander Chupriyan was quoted as saying by the state-run TASS news agency.

The ministry said at least six children were among the victims. Another six people were found alive, including an infant whose rescue was described as a New Year’s “miracle.”

The governor of Chelyabinsk region, where Magnitogorsk is located 1,700 kilometers east of Moscow, pledged 1 million rubles ($14,400) to the relatives of each victim.

Meanwhile, speculation has swirled around the successive explosions of the Soviet-era apartment block on Monday followed by the minibus on Tuesday. Footage shared by local media showed the minibus engulfed in a blaze accompanied by the sound of either explosives or gunshots.

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Russia’s Investigative Committee responded to the first wave of speculation with an assertion late Tuesday that no traces of explosives had been found at the site of the building’s explosion.

The regional news website znak.com wrote later that a lack of official statements since then has fueled “various rumors and theories in Magnitogorsk and throughout the country.”

“All the while, znak.com’s sources in the Russian FSB in Moscow confirm the theory that it was a terrorist attack,” the website reported Thursday, using the acronym for the Federal Security Service.

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