

Beat: Local

Death toll from Nigerian church collapse hits 115

-, 23.09.2014, 01:33 Time

USPA News - The death toll from a six-story church building collapse in the Nigerian city of Lagos earlier this month has risen to at least 115, including 84 South Africans and one Zimbabwean, the South African government said Monday as Nigerian authorities continued to withhold information. The accident happened at around 12:44 p.m. local time on September 12 when a six-story guest house collapsed at the Lagos complex of the Synagogue Church of All Nations, which is headed by T. B. Joshua.

It is believed improper construction caused the collapse, though Joshua has claimed it was an attack against his church. Speaking on Monday, South African government minister Jeff Radebe, who leads an Inter-Ministerial Task Team to respond to the disaster, said the death toll had risen to at least 115, including 84 South Africans. Nigerian emergency officials, who have refused to provide timely information about casualty figures, did not comment on Radebe's statement. The new death toll came as 25 of the injured, including three children, arrived back home in South Africa on Monday. "All South Africans injured in Nigeria when the building collapsed have been brought back home except for one who decided to go back to Synagogue Church of all Nations," Radebe said. The most seriously injured patients were brought out of the plane on stretchers first and taken to ambulances, which were waiting at Swartkop Air Force Base in Pretoria. All of the victims were transported to Steve Biko Hospital for assessment before being either discharged or transferred to another hospital for further treatment. Among those who returned home were two children who lost both their parents in the collapse, the South African government said. One other victim suffered kidney complications and was receiving dialysis while another patient had developed gangrene which may cause his or her toes to be amputated. Monday's operation marked South Africa's biggest repatriation mission since the end of the country's apartheid era. Radebe said a South African Assessment team in Lagos was continuing its work to finalize the process of returning all 84 South Africans who died in the collapse, but it remains unclear whether other citizens from South Africa are still unaccounted for. The minister asked families of South Africans who are not yet unaccounted for to contact the government. In the previous update on Saturday, the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) said the death toll had increased to 86 after rescue teams convened and re-assessed the casualty figures. But the Nigerian government has refused to disclose the nationalities of the victims and has failed to provide timely updates, with South Africa repeatedly announcing new death tolls days before Nigeria. With at least 84 South African victims, it represents one of the worst tragedies for South Africa in recent years. "Not in the recent history of our country have we had this large number of our people die in one incident outside the country," South African President Jacob Zuma said last week. Nelson Kgwete, a spokesman for South Africa's Department of International Relations and Cooperation, said last week that at least five South African church tour groups were at the complex at the time of the collapse, but Lulu Mnguni, South Africa's High Commissioner to Nigeria, said that other South Africans are believed to have traveled without a tour group. In addition to the South African casualties, state-run media in Zimbabwe reported last week that Greenwich Ndanga, a top opposition official from Zimbabwe's Mashonaland West province, was also killed in the collapse. Movement for Democratic Change (MDC-T) party spokesman Douglas Mwonzora confirmed that Ndanga had been killed. The nationalities of the 30 other victims remained unknown on Monday as Nigeria's handling of the disaster continued to widen a diplomatic rift with South Africa. There was an overwhelming silence on the disaster from public officials in Nigeria, where a national election is less than half a year away and where megachurch leaders are so influential that public officials rarely challenge them. T. B. Joshua initially suggested that the collapse was caused by sabotage in an apparent attack on the church, pointing to a small aircraft which hovered over the building several times just before the collapse, but investigators have dismissed those claims, saying improper construction was likely the cause. They said two floors were being added to the building without fortification of the initial foundation. The rescue and recovery operation concluded on Thursday afternoon, after which authorities claimed that there were no more bodies at the site, even though it remains unknown how many people were inside the building when it caved in. A total of 131 people were rescued in the first few days after the disaster, but Nigerian officials rejected offers from South Africa to send rescue teams to help.

Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-2724/death-toll-from-nigerian-church-collapse-hits-115.html>

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Official Federal Reg. No. 7442619