

Fire tears through California party, up to 40 feared dead

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Oakland: Up to 40 people were feared dead in a huge fire that tore through a converted Oakland warehouse during a late-night electronic music party on Friday.

A coroner's van is parked outside of a warehouse after it was destroyed by fire

Firefighters struggled to get to bodies in the rubble and could and said initial death toll would rise of nine could rise to as high as 40 once crews swept the stricken building.

Most of those who perished in the blaze that started about 11:30 pm (1300 IST) on Friday were thought to have died on the upper floor of the two-story warehouse known as "Oakland Ghost Ship", Oakland Fire Chief Teresa Deloach Reed said.

"It must have been a very fast-moving fire," she told reporters.

Officials described the scene inside the warehouse, which had been illegally converted into artist studios, as a death trap that made it impossible for many partygoers to escape the Friday night fire. And a day later, the maze of debris and devastation was complicating efforts to extract the bodies.

"It was just a labyrinth of little areas. We knew people were in there, and we were trying to get them out. But it was just a labyrinth," Oakland deputy fire chief Mark Hoffmann told reporters Saturday afternoon.

He said that firefighters had to stop their search and rescue operation Saturday afternoon for safety reasons and shore up the structure, but they expected to resume later in the day. The building's roof had collapsed into the second floor, which in places fell to the bottom floor.

Oakland officials said they had opened an investigation just last month into the warehouse after numerous complaints filed by neighbors who said trash was piling up outside the property and people were illegally living in the building, which was zoned as a warehouse.

Darin Ranelletti, of the Oakland Planning Department, said the city opened an investigation Nov. 13 and an investigator went to the premises on Nov. 17 but could not get inside the building. The city has not confirmed people were living inside.

One survivor, however, said that 18 artists lived inside the warehouse.

Bob Mule said he was one of the artists living in the collective space. He told KGO-TV that he and another person smelled smoke and spotted the fire in a back corner and started yelling.

"The fire went up really, really, really quickly," he said.

Mule said he tried to help someone who had an injured ankle but couldn't. "There was a lot of stuff in the way, the flames were too much," Mule said, trailing off. "I hope, I hope he's OK."

The warehouse was known as the "Oakland Ghost Ship." Its website showed pictures of a bohemian, loft-like interior made of wood and cluttered with rugs, old sofas and a garage-sale like collection of pianos, paintings, turntables,

statues and other items.

The website included advertisements for various electronic music parties. Friday night's event featured musician Golden Donna's 100% Silk West Coast tour. A message on the group's website said "Joel is safe but like many people he is heartbroken."

It's unclear what sparked the fire. But officials said the clutter served as a tinderbox and there were no sprinklers inside.

"Something as simple as a cigarette could have started this," Kelly said, adding that people either escaped from the building or died inside, where the only way down from the second story was via a stairwell constructed entirely of wooden pallets. "It appears that either you got out or you got trapped inside."

More than 15 hours after the fire started, rescue crews had only recovered four bodies from the building and dozens of people were still unaccounted for, Kelly said. He said the rescue operation was expected to take a minimum of two days. None of the nine dead have been identified.

About 50 to 100 people were believed to have been at the party when the fire started around 11:30 p.m. Friday, officials said.

Oakland Fire Chief Teresa Deloche-Reed said at least 25 people were unaccounted for. The victims were believed to be people in their 20s, Kelly said. He said as many as 40 may have perished and that the coroner is preparing for a "mass casualty event" that could include victims from other countries.

Panicked friends and family posted messages on the group's Facebook page trying to find out if their loved ones were among the dead. Those searching for the missing were sent to a local sheriff's office, where Dan Vega was anxiously awaiting news. He had been unable to find his younger brother or his brother's girlfriend.

Vega said he was not sure if the two were at the party Friday night but that his brother likes to go to raves and he had not been able to reach him Saturday. His girlfriend's car was still parked at a transit station in San Bruno, south of San Francisco.

Fighting tears, Dan Vega said he's frustrated authorities hadn't been able to tell him anything about his 22-year-old brother.

"I just want to go over there. I have my work boots on. I'm ready to go," Dan Vega said. "Just give me some gloves. I'll help out any way, shape or form, I don't care. This is infuriating. I don't know where my brother's at. I just want to find him."

Oakland police urged those concerned about missing people to call the Alameda County Sheriff's Coroner's Bureau at 510-382-3000.

- (With AP inputs)