

Notre Dame will be closed for up to 6 years

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Bishop Patrick Chauvet acknowledged that the famed monument would close down for "five to six years" as he spoke with local business owners Wednesday.

The damaged interior of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris on Tuesday, April 16, 2019. (Christophe Petit Tesson/Pool via The New York Times)

Paris: Notre Dame's rector says he will close the burned-out Paris cathedral for up to six years. Bishop Patrick Chauvet acknowledged that the famed monument would close down for "five to six years" as he spoke with local business owners Wednesday, two days after a blaze torched the roof of the cathedral and brought down its spire.

Chauvet said "a segment of the cathedral has been very weakened" by the devastating fire. He did not elaborate which section he was talking about.

Sparks fill the air as Paris Fire brigade members spray water to extinguish flames as the Notre Dame Cathedral burns in Paris, France, April 15, 2019. REUTERS/Philippe Wojazer

He added it was unclear what the church's 67 employees would be doing in the future. The French prime minister has announced an international architects' competition to rebuild the spire of Notre Dame Cathedral.

Edouard Philippe is speaking following a special Cabinet meeting Wednesday held by French President Emmanuel Macron, focusing on the reconstruction of the cathedral. Philippe said the competition aims at "giving Notre Dame a spire adapted to technologies and challenges of our times."

Firefighters tackle the blaze as flames and smoke rise from Notre Dame cathedral as it burns in Paris, Monday, April 15, 2019. Massive plumes of yellow brown smoke is filling the air above Notre Dame Cathedral and ash is falling on tourists and others around the island that marks the center of Paris. (AP Photo/Thibault Camus)

He said authorities have no estimate yet of the total cost of the renovation work. Macron said Tuesday he wants the cathedral to be rebuilt in five years. Philippe said: "This is obviously a huge challenge, a historic responsibility."

The Paris prosecutor's office says investigators looking into the causes of the Notre Dame fire have still not been able to look inside the cathedral, as it remains unsafe. Investigators will continue with interviews Wednesday, saying the inquiry will go on until prosecutors uncover "the truth and identify the origin" of the blaze.

A firefighter uses a hose as Notre Dame cathedral burns in Paris, Monday, April 15, 2019. A catastrophic fire engulfed the upper reaches of Paris' soaring Notre Dame Cathedral as it was undergoing renovations

Monday, threatening one of the greatest architectural treasures of the Western world as tourists and Parisians looked on aghast from the streets below. (AP Photo/Francois Mori)

On Tuesday, investigators spoke with around 30 witnesses, including employees of companies involved in the church's restoration and security personnel.

The Czech Philharmonic and other major Czech orchestras will join forces to play a fundraising concert to help restore Notre Dame Cathedral, heavily damaged by a devastating fire.

The Czech Philharmonic says the orchestras will perform Antonin Dvorak's "Stabat Mater" in St. Vitus Cathedral, a Gothic masterpiece, in Prague on Tuesday.

French PM says govt will take measures to secure financing

Meanwhile, French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe says the government will take a series of measures to secure the financing and accelerate the renovation work of Notre Dame Cathedral.

Speaking after a special Cabinet meeting dedicated to Notre Dame, Philippe said the government will present a bill next week to ensure "transparency and good management" during the reconstruction.

He said one measure will aim at ensuring that all donations actually end up going to Notre Dame. The bill will also allow French ordinary citizens to get special tax cuts if they make a donation.

Another measure will enable the French state to adapt legal procedures in order to ease the reconstruction.

Organist playing during fire says people didn't immediately react when alarm went off

The organist who was playing at evening mass inside Notre Dame when flames began heading towards the iconic cathedral's roof says people didn't immediately react when the fire alarm rang as a priest was reading from the Bible.

Johann Vexo says "nobody knew exactly what it was because it was the first time that we heard it inside the cathedral."

People then started to leave the building but some, including Vexo, later came back. The organist says he spent another 20 minutes inside the cathedral, chatting to colleagues, before finally leaving at about 6.45 p.m. local time on Monday night.

Vexo says he didn't see fire or smoke and "really thought that it was just something not working good or just a mistake, or whatever."

Notre Dame's spectacular and unique great organ seemingly escaped largely intact from the blaze that destroyed

the roof and spire.

Vincent Dubois, another Notre Dame organist who wasn't in the cathedral, says the organ "must be completely dusted off, cleaned from the soot, the dust that is inside."

Paris prosecutor says investigators looking into causes of fire

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- AP