

INNER-CITY FIRE ANALYSIS

Johannesburg fire – ‘I had to jump out from the third floor with my four-year-old’



The smouldering five-storey Johannesburg CBD building on the corner of Alberts and Delvers streets. (Photo: Felix Dlangamandla)

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31 Aug 2023

At least 73 people have been killed and 52 injured in a raging fire in a five-storey hijacked building on the corner Alberts and Delvers streets in the Johannesburg city centre. Daily Maverick spoke to witnesses and survivors on the scene on Thursday morning.

By 11am on Thursday, the blaze at the Johannesburg Property Company-owned building in downtown Johannesburg had claimed 73 lives. It is said to have had as many as 200 people living in it, some of whom had leapt from windows to escape the flames, witnesses say.

Residents said the fire was started by a candle lit during load shedding.

As bodies lined the street outside the smouldering old heritage building, it was reported that the fire escapes had been sealed, trapping people inside.

Robert Mulaudzi of the city's emergency services said search-and-recovery operations are ongoing and firefighters are moving through the building to pull out possibly more bodies.

News of the deadly fire in Johannesburg spread across the world on Thursday morning.



Bodies lined up outside the Johannesburg CBD building on Thursday morning. (Photo: Felix Dlangamandla)



The fire reportedly started at about around 1.30am. (Photo: Felix Dlangamandla)

“On arrival firefighters started to evacuate all the people out of the building while conducting firefighting operations, 10 people were confirmed dead on scene and 42 people were treated on scene later transported to various healthcare facilities for further medical care. At this stage the cause of the fire incident is still a subject of investigations,” he said.

The disaster comes six weeks after a [gas explosion](#) ripped through the CBD, killing one person, leaving 48 others injured. The source of methane gas is yet to be confirmed.

Officials from City of Johannesburg Disaster Management have been dispatched to start facilitating relief for affected people.

Residents reeling

While the building smouldered, frightened people emerged to look for friends and family.

One of the fire victims, Zekie Somtsewu, said she is still reeling from seeing four dead people in her small flat.

When she heard a loud bang as her window cracked from the fire, Somtsewu thought someone had thrown a petrol bomb into her flat. Confused, she grabbed a 5-litre bucket she used as a toilet and tried to douse the fire. When this failed she covered her 18-month-old child with a large bomber jacket and made her way out.

“They allowed us to go check if we can save some of our stuff, but when I walked in four people had died in there. I’m on the third floor by the passage, so I think people thought it was safe. I grabbed my child’s clothes, small things, and ran out,” she told *Daily Maverick*.

Another resident, Nokwazi Mabuza, was left barefoot since she couldn’t salvage anything. “People set up blankets on the ground for us to jump out. I had to jump out from the third floor with my four-year-old.”



City of Johannesburg Emergency Management Services firefighters on the scene on the corner Alberts and Delvers streets. (Photo: Felix Dlangamandla)

Mabuza is an immigrant from Swaziland and has lived in the building for four years. She says the building is poorly maintained but is better than the informal settlement she used to live in and is closer to her part-time job at a clothing firm.

“When we first moved in here, only women and children lived here, but they allowed men, drug dealers and other people to live here. Electricity is not connected well, sometimes we do it ourselves. Even the water we use is the water that is meant to be for emergencies like fire,” said Mabuza, adding that there were fire extinguishers in the building but not a sufficient fire escape plan.

Mabuza is one of hundreds of people lining the two blocks around the building, waiting for help. They are either immigrants or from far-flung provinces such as the Eastern Cape.

Each floor had a gate that could be locked at night, and residents say that is why some people were stuck, while others got stuck because, in panic, they tried to retrieve large pieces of furniture, such as mattresses, which blocked passages and exits.

At the scene the mood was sombre. People watching the horror unfold worried about neighbours and friends they couldn't see. "Do you know how many people have died? We can't even call people we can't see here, we lost everything," said one woman.

A concerned mother has joined the crowd behind the police tape and is looking for her daughter who lived in the building. "I can't even speak right now... My child... nobody has told us anything. I don't know which hospital they have gone to, I keep trying her phone," she said, too shocked to share her name.



Firefighters search the building for more victims. (Photo: Felix Dlangamandla)

Nokuthula (27) doesn't have relatives nearby. She and her boyfriend are from the Eastern Cape. "The fire started from ground floor, it happened so quickly. I'm on the fourth floor, I don't know where I will go. My boyfriend is injured on his leg but he is okay."

She had sent her two-year old child to Rosettenville hospital to be safe. She has lived in the building for three months. They moved there to be closer to her boyfriend's workplace.

Non-profit organisations such as Gift of the Givers are on-site with food, water and blankets.

Nokuthula says she needs a place to sleep, clothes and food – any help.

‘People were screaming’

Speaking to journalists at the scene, Johannesburg MMC for public safety Mgcini Tshwaku said: “It is very traumatic. I have never seen so many dead bodies in my life, burnt beyond recognition.

“There were also kids; a 12-month-old child was among them who burned completely.”

Tshwaku said it appeared an informal settlement inside the building had been formed using highly inflammable materials which may have further ignited the fire.

“The main reason that there is a high death toll is that there are a lot of gates in between the building. People were screaming, trying to get out, but they could not. Many burnt bodies were found stashed on the gates.”

This is a developing story.

Helpline

A call centre has been set up to help families locate missing people or bodies. The numbers are: 0800 203 886, 011 241 5767 and 011 355 3048. The bodies have been taken to Diepkloof mortuary and the survivors to Helen Joseph, Charlotte Maxeke, Chris Hani Baragwanath, Tembisa Provincial and South Rand hospitals.