

Israeli government launches inquiry into worst-ever civil disaster

By Harvey Thompson
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Ariel Sharon's Likud-led coalition has been forced to convene a Commission of Inquiry into building safety, following last week's collapse of the Versailles wedding hall during a party in which 23 people were killed and over 300 injured.

Cabinet Secretary Gideon Star told Israel Radio, "The inquiry will deal with all the wider issues of responsibility for the safety of buildings used by the public." The *Knesset* (parliament) is also to hold a special session on the disaster.

Last week, at about 22.45 local time on Thursday night, the central area of the hall, which included a dance floor, suddenly caved in. Scores of guests who just moments before had been celebrating crashed through two more floors and were buried beneath falling masonry and furniture. The exact moment of the disaster was caught on an amateur video camera. The footage is horrific: One moment people are laughing and dancing, some carrying young children and the next they disappear in a cloud of rubble.

Many of those who survived later told of having been worried that the floor of the hall seemed to be shaking. One survivor, Shlomi Srur, had told his son during the celebration, "The floor is trembling here, something is wrong. I have a bad feeling." Within minutes, his wife and two of his sons fell through the floor and were killed.

Survivors trapped on the remains of the top floor had to climb down the side of the building, while others trapped in the rubble cried for help. From early Friday morning, Israeli Home Front rescue teams sifted through the rubble of the gutted building. They included team members who had assisted at the scenes of earthquake disasters in India, Turkey, and Greece. Their work was severely hampered; as heavy equipment could not be used for fear that the rest of the

building would collapse.

On Saturday, less than 48 hours after the collapse, the search for survivors was called off as authorities confirmed they had accounted for everyone in the building. This was despite the fact that some foreign or Palestinian workers employed at an aluminium factory on the first floor of the building could still be trapped beneath the rubble, with their families being unaware of their disappearance. On Monday night, an inner wall and the remainder of the third floor ceiling of the banquet hall caved in.

Around 103 people are still in hospital, eight of these in a serious condition. Among the injured are the bride and groom, Keren and Assaf Dror, who met at a Fiat garage where they both worked.

According to a preliminary investigation, there are strong indicators of negligence in the original 1986 construction; it was also found that a supporting column was removed in renovations three months ago.

Ten people have been arrested, including the owners of the hall, an engineer responsible for ceiling construction, and contractors and builders involved in recent renovations. The primary suspects could face charges of causing death through negligence. One of the engineers is suspected of sending a worker to the municipal offices in Jerusalem to try to remove documents linked to the construction. A police spokesman hinted that there would be another wave of arrests, and that they would also question officials at Jerusalem's City Hall, where building permits are issued.

Public outrage over the tragedy is a serious threat to Likud. The Versailles wedding hall is virtually indistinguishable from the other buildings in the Talpiot area, which contains a collection of car dealerships, electronic stores, and factory outlets.

The scale of destruction inside the shell of the Versailles building, which now has a three storey gaping hole through its centre, confirm reports that the structure was sub-standard. Spindly rods poke out from concrete flooring, and the floors appear to have been constructed of thin, sandy concrete laid over metal mesh. This cheap method of construction known as "Pal-Kal," was used for many public buildings built in Israel in the 1980s, including the Bank of Israel and the central library of Tel Aviv University. The method was banned only five years ago.

The construction of buildings like the Versailles hall could not have been carried out so widely without higher authorisation. Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert, a leading member of Likud, has been keen to play down the tragedy, saying there would be increased safety inspections, but within limits, "No one expects us to examine every building in the city of Jerusalem." Meanwhile his deputy never tires of repeating the refrain that the building was built for an industrial purpose—not to hold wedding receptions.

The mayor faces growing calls to resign. Two opposition members on Jerusalem's city council said in a statement that Olmert allowed businesses in Jerusalem to operate without permits and supervision. The liberal *Ha'aretz* newspaper also criticised the mayor. It added that the disaster reflected a combination of professional negligence, illegal operations and the flouting of business licensing laws. Under the headline "Olmert must go", a local Jerusalem weekly newspaper said the mayor must bear responsibility for the tragedy. For his part, the mayor has said he has no intention of resigning because he had a "clear conscience".

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