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Kin get help with red tap

Businesses, gov't offices are struggling to reopen

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As New Yorkers prepared to vote today, the city mustered a team of lawyers to help grieving relatives through the painful process of declaring the thousands missing under the World Trade Center rubble legally dead.

"I believe that it is certainly time to say that the chances of finding anyone would involve a miracle," said Mayor Giuliani in his strongest comments yet on the possibility of finding any survivors. "Miracles have happened, but it would be unfair to offer kind of broad hope to people."

The number of confirmed dead rose yesterday by 15, to 276, while the missing toll remained at 6,453. The last survivor was found Sept. 12, the day after the twin towers attacks.

The mayor's announcement came after Gov. Pataki signed an executive order allowing the relatives of the missing to get death certificates in days instead of years. This will enable them to file insurance claims, disburse estates and withdraw as much as \$15,000 from bank and money market accounts that are in victims' names.

As he spoke of the dwindling hopes of finding any survivors, Giuliani said he was sorry he could not attend the funerals of all the firefighters, cops and other city workers lost in the attacks. He vowed to make sure all are honored.

"The mayor should be at the funerals," he said. "For people who are serving the City of New York, who die in the line of duty."

Crowds returning

For days, Giuliani has urged New Yorkers to strike back at the terrorists by returning to their routines. Yesterday, massive traffic jams and sidewalks packed with pedestrians in lower Manhattan were testaments to a city getting back to work.

Some of the major bank branches and stores that had been closed since Sept. 11 reopened yesterday. And tomorrow, the New York District of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service at 26 Federal Plaza is expected to reopen for emergency travel document requests and other limited services.

At the newly reopened Citibank branch at Pine St. and Broadway, the bank's manager, Lawrence Goldberg, scanned the faces, looking for favorite customers.

"We're missing all of our clients," he said, his voice breaking. "I hope to God they're all right."

The wood-paneled and brass-trimmed McDonald's at Broadway and Liberty St. also reopened its doors after workers paused to remember those killed.

"I saw it all," said an assistant manager, Moses Rivera, 27. "And every time I think about what they took away from us, I start crying. But I guess we all have to be strong."

For days, pedestrians had jammed the sidewalk outside the McDonald's to stare or snap photos of Ground Zero. But yesterday, workers hung blue tarpaulins

from scaffolding to block the view from Broadway and keep people moving.

A few blocks away, on Wall St., stocks surged, with the Dow up 368 points — a big boost after last week's decline.

But as traders celebrated, Wall St. building manager Ted Paolini waited for elections officials to deliver two voting machines for today's primary — and fretted.

"We shouldn't be responsible for watching over the machines," he said. "I have a security guard at the front desk, but I can't ask him to keep an eye on them when they arrive."

Voters are distracted

Liz Weber, 31, a singer still trying to get back in her Battery Park City apartment, said she couldn't think about voting.

"I don't know who to vote for, and I'm a Democrat," she said. "The only person who makes me feel good about rebuilding the city is Giuliani. I'm not even in my apartment yet, so the election doesn't seem all that important."

Even as he urged citizens to vote today, the mayor declined to say whether he would push to overturn the city's term-limits law and run again.

"I need time to reflect on what I'm going to do," he said.

At Ground Zero, the search continued, although construction workers far outnumbered the cops, firefighters and FBI agents picking through the rubble.

Wearing masks as protection against the stench of rotting food and decaying bodies, the rescuers said they had gotten no orders to stop looking for survivors.

A city rescue worker who asked not to be identified said he has been seeking solace in a most unlikely place — the morgue that has been set up in a tent near the American Express Building.

"I found the morgue a purposeful place to work," he said. "There is always something to do, and it gives you closure. There is a serenity and reverence because whatever they bring in, a body part ... it is labeled [as to] where it was found. Then the chaplains pay their respects, and everything comes to a halt."

Nearby, flatbed trucks hauled huge pieces of wreckage out of Ground Zero to the riverfront across from Stuyvesant High School. From there, it was lifted by giant cranes onto barges for the journey to the Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island.

So far, 106,838 tons of debris have been removed. Thousands more remain.

Among those who came to Ground Zero yesterday was Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, who bowed his head at the scene of destruction.

"It's disastrous and infuriating," the visibly shaken Koizumi said. "There remains still so much debris and smoke all around. I don't know what to say."



MOVING REMINDERS NYPD Sgt. Glenn DiResto checks some of the sands of thank-you and sympathy cards taped to barrier near Ground Zero.

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