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Trade Center's shell is pulled down by cranes

Hope for the missing fades

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Giant cranes started pulling down the jagged skeleton of 2 World Trade Center yesterday, removing a potent visual symbol of the terror attacks as relatives of the missing steeled themselves to apply today for death certificates.

Onlookers stood silent and held back tears as a 650-ton crane armed with three steel cables started toppling the 100-foot-tall shell of the once-mighty tower about 5 p.m.

"It's heartbreaking watching it fall," said Vera Blake, 59, of Brooklyn. "I still don't believe this is happening in America."

The distinctive steel ribbing of the World Trade Center started to sway like a tree in the wind before two parts of a 25-foot section tumbled down about 5:30 p.m.

Radha Metro watched in silence, remembering the thousands of friends and strangers who perished in the attacks on the twin towers.

"It feels like one more horrible thing to watch," said Metro, 28.

The eerie beauty of the skeleton had made it an enduring symbol of the attacks, and many suggested it could become the centerpiece of a memorial.

Mayor Giuliani said workers had to pull down the shell to allow them to safely search the area near it.

But he promised to save the pieces for a possible monument to the victims.

"We will preserve as much of that wall as possible," Giuliani said.

Still holding out hope

With hope of finding survivors all but gone, the city will help the families of the missing file applications for death certificates starting this morning.

But many of the heartbroken relatives at the family center on Pier 94 say they are simply unwilling to accept their loved ones are gone.

"No, no, no, no," said Danny Tijero, of Astoria, Queens, whose cousin Robert Martinez is missing. "I continue to wait and hope in God."

Today is Anna Vdovitsa's first wedding anniversary with her husband, Alexander, a computer programmer who is missing.

"I understand it's almost impossible [he is alive], but I won't give up," said Vdovitsa, 20, of Brooklyn. "Hope is always inside of us."

Since the Sept. 11 terror attack, Giuliani has tried to prepare families for the worst while refusing to dash all hopes that survivors would be found.

Yesterday, he acknowledged that there was next to no chance of finding any more survivors.

"People have to come to this in their own hearts," Giuliani said. "This is up to the family to decide whether this is the step they want to take at this time.

"The realities are just the realities."

Giuliani updated the death toll to 287, of whom 224 have been identified.

No survivors have been found since the day after the attack.

The number of missing dropped to 6,347, and officials said that number could fluctuate.

Workers have now removed 115,755 tons of rubble from Ground Zero.

Nonvoters change minds

Amid the grim news and a steady morning drizzle, New Yorkers trickled to the polls for low-key primary elections as lower Manhattan people and business owners took more baby steps on the path to recovery.

For some locals, the attacks instilled them with renewed determination to exercise their right to vote.

"Other people have to vote with guns. I vote with the flip of my finger," said Isaac Feldman, 45, who is still barred from returning to his Tribeca home. "I like it that way."

Tony Musco said he hadn't planned on voting Sept. 11, the original primary date. The primary was postponed within hours of the attacks.

"After the incident, I feel it's my duty," said Musco, 32, a choreographer from Tribeca. "It woke something up in me."

But others simply stayed away — and turnout was reported near a record low.

Some hoped to write in Giuliani's name, although he urged them not to do so and says he has not decided whether to seek legal changes that could allow him to run for a third term.

So much has changed

Meanwhile, the Rev. Jesse Jackson toured Ground Zero in a white hardhat. He came away moved by the extent of the destruction — and the depth of the determination of rescue workers.

"Somehow, where there's pain abounding, joy abounds," said Jackson. "In the end, faith will prevail."

About a block away from the site of the devastation, Delores Cordoba hugged the few customers who wandered into her Tajin Mexican restaurant during lunch hour.

"We used to be packed at this time, now it's nothing," said Cordoba, 37. "It will take years to be like it was. It took us so long to build this business."

City Council Speaker Peter Vallone announced yesterday a $50 million emergency loan program for businesses hurt by the attacks.

At 88 Greenwich St., owner David Lowenfeld welcomed tenants back to the 35-story luxury building, where a team of cleaners was clearing dust.

"New Yorkers are tough and gritty," he said. "Life is coming back to normal."

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