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THE NEW YORK TIMES, THURSDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2001

5 Die as Scaffolding Collapses At Manhattan Office Building



Edward Keating/The New York Times

Firefighters, police officers and rescue crews work to extract workers trapped after scaffolding collapsed at 215 Park Avenue South.

By RICHARD LEZIN JONES

Five construction workers were killed yesterday and 10 others were injured when a scaffolding collapsed at a Manhattan office building and buried them under a pile of shattered wood and mangled metal. Rescue workers were still clearing the rubble late last night but did not believe there were any more victims.

The collapse just after 4 p.m. trapped 15 construction workers who had been on the 14-story-tall scaffolding in a courtyard behind the building at 215 Park Avenue South, pointing brickwork and cleaning windows, officials said.

Emergency workers — some of whom had been clearing debris at the World Trade Center site — were sent to the scene of the collapse and used buckets and their bare hands to pick through the rubble. Firefighters stood atop piles of debris and used chain saws to cut through broken wood planks and twisted metal bars, moving cautiously to avoid further injuring anyone who might be trapped underneath.

Fire officials said last night that the cause of the collapse was unknown. Early reports suggested that the brick facade of the building, at 18th Street, had loosened, but other officials said the scaffolding might have been overloaded.

Fire officials said they were interviewing the contractor at the site, the company that erected the scaffolding, and the building's longtime manager, Stephen L. Green, a brother of the Democratic candidate for mayor, Mark Green.

A building inspector had cited the landlord on Aug. 1, after finding that a section of brick facade was cracked and leaning away from the building, but it was unclear if that was a factor in the accident.

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None of the dead had been identified by the authorities last night. Officials said that 15 men had been working near the scaffolding when it fell. Four men caught in the collapse were pronounced dead at the scene, and another died at Cabrini Medical Center. Ten others were taken to local hospitals, where they were being treated last night for broken bones and internal injuries. Some were listed in critical condition. Eight firefighters and three police officers suffered minor injuries while digging out victims.

The rescue effort was complicated by the amount of debris, which stood nearly three stories tall and filled the building's rear courtyard, forcing some rescue workers to reach through windows to reach those who had been trapped. Search dogs were brought to the scene. Firefighters also had to remove part of the facade that was threatening to collapse.

"It's very tight quarters," said Fire Commissioner Thomas Von Essen, who arrived at the scene with Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani shortly after the accident. "There's no way to put big machinery in there."

The collapse, which occurred little more than two miles from the World Trade Center disaster, jolted city residents who were already jittery because of the terror attacks and continuing anthrax scares. Indeed, many witnesses said that when they first heard of the collapse their thoughts turned to Sept. 11.

Rose Marcotte, 34, was working in on the 17th floor when she heard a loud noise. "I put somebody on hold, and I looked out my window and there was a black and gray cloud going straight up, and I just flipped out," she said.

A co-worker, Nancy Sellar, said they didn't have to be told what to do next. "We knew someone who died in the World Trade Center because she went back for her purse," she said. "So we ran for the stairs without our keys, our cellular phone, our purses."

Joe Narciso, who worked on the fourth floor of the building in offices leased by Beth Israel Medical Center, also fled. "I heard this sound like a train rumbling by," he said. "It clicked in my head: 'I hope it's not the scaffolding.' "

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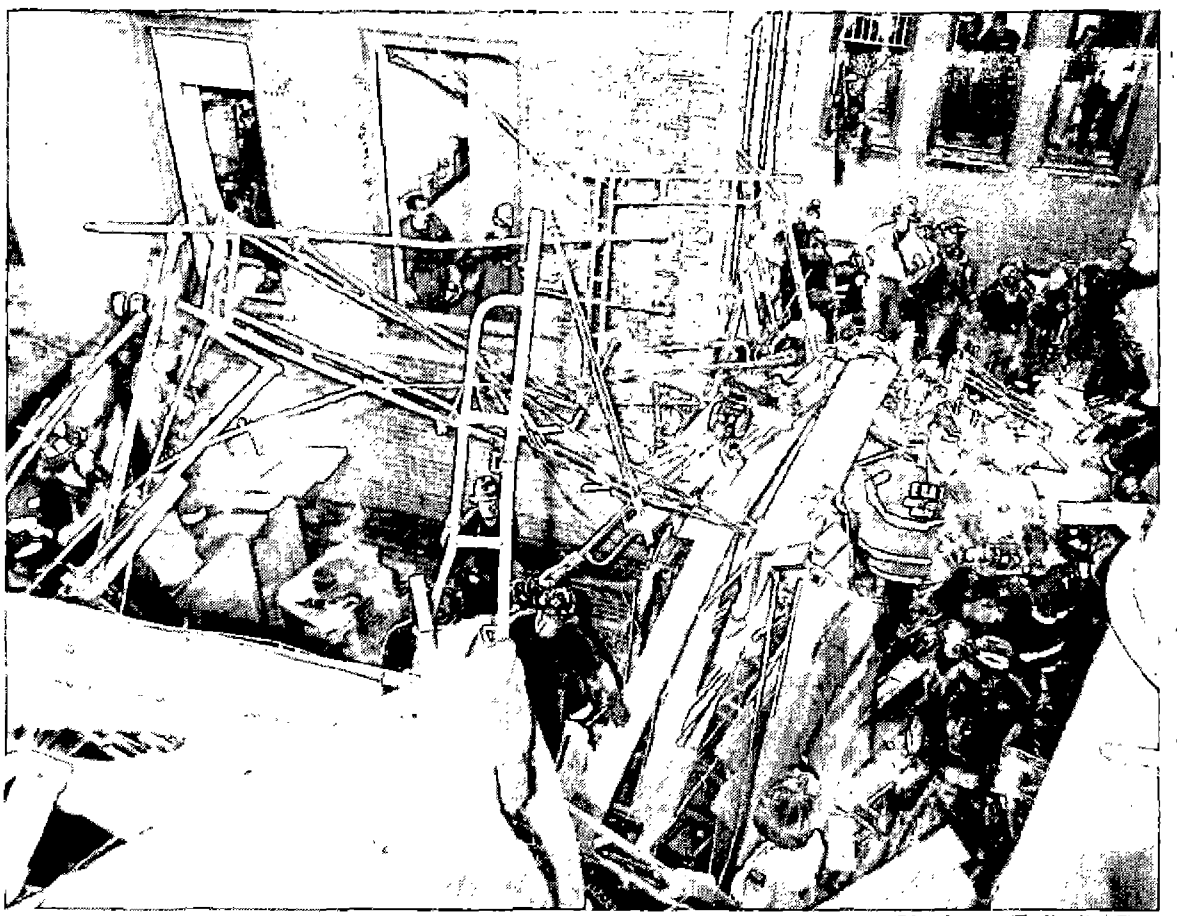

Edward Keating/The New York Times

Five people were killed when a scaffolding on a building at Park Avenue South and 18th Street collapsed.

Mr. Narciso turned to a window just as the scaffolding fell and the construction workers fell helplessly with it. "They just kept falling down and down," he said.

As the dust settled, Haywood Gerst, who worked as a security guard in the 11th floor offices of The Source magazine, said he was haunted by what he heard next. "I heard yelling and screaming," he said. "'Help, help, get me out of here,' they screamed."

Freddy Tapia, a construction worker who descended the scaffolding moments before it fell, walked away with only minor injuries. Shortly after the collapse, he could be seen wandering near the building, covered in a thick, white dust, whispering the Hail Mary to himself in Spanish. Mr. Tapia, a native of Ecuador, said that he had been working at the construction site for a week. He was looking for his cousin, Armando Tapia, 28, who was missing.

Another worker, Angelo Panama, 17, said that moments before the scaffolding came down, workers had been lifting material on a rope. "I'm happy I'm alive," he said in Spanish through an interpreter.

His co-worker, Gary Hernandez, injured his left knee when a wooden plank fell on his leg in the collapse. Mr. Hernandez, 34, said that hours before the collapse, someone replaced two plastic tubes that had cracked atop the scaffolding. Mr. Hernandez, a native of Peru who now lives in Queens, said that it was not uncommon to see cracks on the scaffolding's tubing. He said that pieces of concrete were also accumulating on the planks of the scaffolding and that he and his co-workers — who were paid $8 an hour — were told not to remove them.

The collapse stirred emotions among the rescuers, too. "Six guys from my company were trapped in the World Trade Center," said Joe Ortiz, of Ladder Company 6. The difference in this incident, he said, was that rescue workers were able to rescue people. "It's always good to see someone alive," he said.

Office workers said that the construction had been under way since the summer. Ms. Marcotte said she often wondered about the safety precautions being taken.

"We'd see old, rusty wheelbarrows full of bricks beings hoisted right past our window without anything stabilizing it," she said. "Sometimes, there would be debris, little rocks falling on our air conditioner."

Some nearby buildings were evacuated. One evacuee, Colleen Helfer, a Battery Park City resident, had been staying at the W Union Square Hotel next door. "We're going from one mess to another," Mrs. Helfer, 66, said.

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