NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

It's Slow Going At Ground Zero

Safety key at huge demolition site

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Two months and one week after the Twin Towers collapsed, ghostly white smoke still rises in tendrils from the compacted wreckage of the buildings at Ground Zero. Two sections of the facade of the North Tower still stand, hundreds of feet high.

GROUND ZERO

The smell and the sight of the leaning facade belie the progress made by crews working around the clock since Sept. 11. The appearance of the city's largest demolition site now is dominated by trucks and cranes and earth movers, not the jagged piles of steel and concrete once eight, 10, 15 stories high.

"The work is still hard and slow," said one worker. "It's harder now because we're getting down to the lower levels."

Debris has been removed from below street level. Some earth movers are working 40 feet below grade. Only the buckets and the tops of their jointed arms can be seen from the street.

The material in the Trade Center's basement levels is particularly compacted, workers said, and therefore harder to remove. Yet there are potentially dangerous voids in the debris, as evidenced by the fires continuing to burn within them. In the past weeks, such voids have collapsed as much as 15 feet under the weight and movement of large machines. Some workers were injured, although not seriously.

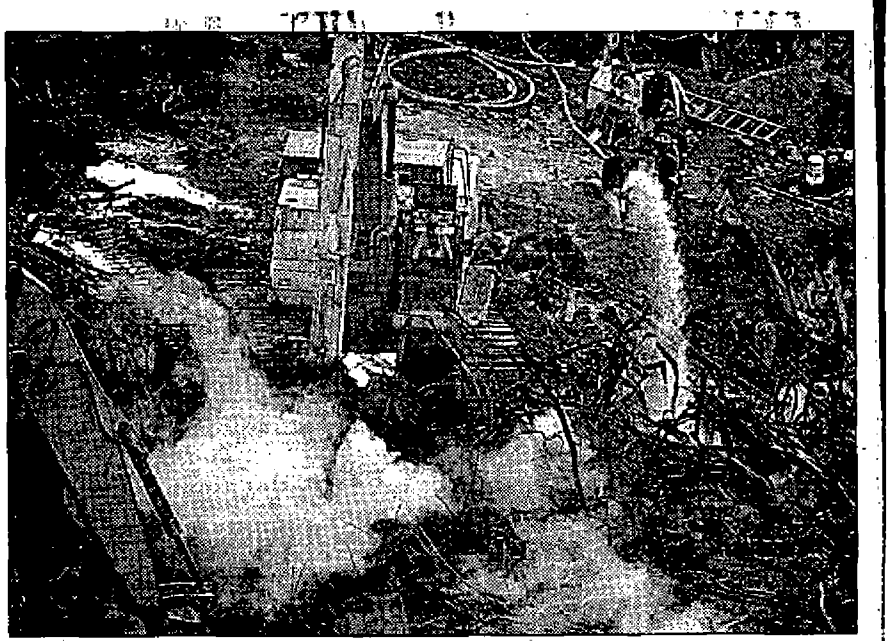
"It's pretty scary to drop 15 feet," one foreman said.

As a precaution, debris is being removed from the sides instead of the top whenever possible.

Ramps and roadways have been created out of the mess, allowing large trucks to drive into Ground Zero to receive loads of debris. The trucks transfer the debris to barges headed for the immense landfill on Staten Island.

Seven towering cranes, American flags hung from their cables, are stationed around the perimeter to lift the largest pieces of debris. The earth movers excavate the rest. Iron workers still must cut away embedded pieces of steel. The discovery of body parts is routine. The color of Ground Zero ranges from an ash gray to almost black.

To the south of Ground Zero, two of the most heavily damaged buildings, Bankers Trust and 90 West St., are still draped in a mournful black shrouds of protective netting, covering deep gashes in the skin of the buildings.



Newsday Photo / Jiro Ose

Smoke escapes Thursday from pockets within Ground Zero at World Trade Center site.

Within a few weeks, workers said, the North Tower's facade probably will be removed and with it, any recognizable remains of the giant towers. Workers will cut away at the bottom of the facade with torches, allowing cranes to lift them away.

Demolition work has begun on the remains of 5 and 6 World Trade, on the north side of the complex and all but destroyed when the towers collapsed. These burned and shattered structures are the most dramatic remnants of the destruction, as they still look more like buildings than debris. With their removal, Ground Zero no longer will exist above ground level.

The first structure built on Ground Zero since the attacks of Sept. 11 is a roughly constructed wooden observation deck at the corner of Liberty and West streets, about 100 yards away from the principal excavation site. This is where guests of the city are taken to view the work. Scrawled onto the railing of the deck are handwritten messages left by mourners and well-wishers. It is difficult to find a bare spot.

The shortest note is two words: "Not fair." Firefighters and cops from all over the country have written on the railing. So have employees of American and United airlines. And so have relatives of the Trade Center victims. One is written to a son named Frank. It is signed simply, "Mom and Dad."

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