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WTC blaze should be out soon

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The stubborn blaze under the destroyed World Trade Center — the longest structural fire in the nation's history — could be out by the end of the month, a top fire official predicted.

Deputy Chief Charles Blaich said recovery workers were digging to final hot spots and said firefighters could extinguish the flames sometime this month — or by January, at the latest.

Blaich made his comments Tuesday night during a parents meeting at Public School 3.

A Fire Department spokesman would not elaborate yesterday on the remarks. Fire officials have maintained that no one knows how long it will take to put out the fires.

Still, Blaich's comments are in line with the predictions of several firefighters at Ground Zero who believe the fires do not go deeper than the third basement level of the complex.

Direct spraying of water

The blazes, fueled by office furniture, cars and other flammable material, have only enough oxygen to smolder and likely won't burn out on their own.

The only way to extinguish them is to dig down and spray water directly on the flames.

Every day, workers get closer to the hot spots as more than half of the 1.2 million tons of debris at the site has been hauled away. In recent weeks, recovery workers have gotten into underground stairwells near the north tower and plaza, finding groups of victims.

"It seems like they are pulling them out four and five at a time," said Gregg Nolan, a foreman for the International Union of Operating Engineers.

Accident halts work

Work was stopped briefly yesterday when an excavating machine accidentally punctured a 55-gallon drum. Once it was determined the drum held harmless cleaning fluid, work resumed.

A charred portion of the north tower is still standing and remains one of the biggest challenges aboveground. It will be taken down by a giant crane that engineers are repositioning.

At the southern end of the site, workers are down as far as three levels in some areas, and along Vesey St., 7 World Trade Center has been cleared and paved over, and 5 and 6 World Trade Center are being demolished.

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