NYC 9/11 Public Portal Document

WASHINGTON POST, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2001

Death Tally Falling as City Sifts Reports and Remains

By MICHAEL POWELL
Washington Post Staff Writer

NEW YORK, Dec. 14—The death tally rolls in each evening from the city's Office of Emergency Management, the fax sheet offering gradations of the lost: the certified dead, the confirmed dead, and the missing and presumed dead.

But the grand total is never the same. In fact, the official death tally has been in free-fall for months.

The first few days after Sept. 11 offered wild estimates—"10,000 FEARED DEAD," the New York Daily News proclaimed. City officials on Sept. 24 offered their highest estimate: 6,729. That estimate soon fell to 6,300, to 5,000, to 4,448, and to 3,019 on Thursday.

At 5 p.m. today, the number stood at 3,018.

The problem, in retrospect, was predictable. Two vast office buildings collapsed at the beginning of the workday. The buildings, when full, held about 25,000 people. But no one knew who was in the buildings at that time, on that day. And no one knew how many escaped.

So Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani and other city, state and federal officials put out calls for relatives and friends to file missing person reports, and they wound up with hundreds of duplicate reports. Then the embassies and foreign consulates began dialing in numbers. Some spoke of hundreds of dead undocumented workers and homeless persons.

"You didn't need to be a family member to fill out a missing report," explained Ellen Borakove, spokeswoman for the medical examiner's office. "And a lot of people were later found alive."

By that time, the tragedy, and the number, had assumed a totemic significance. The president, the secretary of state, prime ministers and senators all talked of 6,000 and 5,000 dead. Some seemed to take solace in the notion that their loved ones had died in the worst tragedy in U.S. history.

When published reports appeared questioning the total, in the New York Times, the Daily News and Newsday, Giuliani did not take it well. He accused reporters of being "macabre" and implied that they were playing some weird game of gotcha.

But the number of dead kept falling.

The tally is composed of information taken from many agencies. The medical examiner has used a 100-person DNA lab and a floating team of forensic dentists, who zip open body bags 24 hours a day now. A person can be declared dead by a tattoo, a piece of a tooth, a ring or a DNA sample.

"If we have an ID by any of the traditional routes, that's enough," Borakove said.

The police, the fire department, emergency services and the law department all pitched in. "The number is fluid," said John Mohan of the Office of Emergency Management. "There's no finality to it."

All that's certain is that there are many unidentified bodies. Each afternoon, the medical examiner faxes out a list of newly identified dead. Three names arrived today:

Lawn, Steven, 28.
Lederman, Alan J., 43.
Ryjova, Tatiana, 36.

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