

New Orleans States-Item

Rault Fire Report Blames Arsonist  
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By WALT PHILBIN

Investigators have concluded the Nov. 29 Rault Center fire that claimed the lives of six persons was deliberately set, the state fire marshal said here today.

While it has been determined the fire was the work of an arsonist, investigators have come up with no prime suspects, Fire Marshal Raymond Oliver said in releasing a long-awaited state report on the fatal fire.

Three reasons for the arson conclusion, Oliver said, are:

—The rapid spread of the blaze on the 15th floor of the skyscraper.

—The discovery of a "petroleum type" chemical in the area where the fire started.

—The nature of a fire earlier that day on the 16th floor of the building. The investigation determined the first fire also was set, in two separate areas of a dressing room for women employees.

Oliver said his office and the homicide division of the New Orleans Police Department are continuing their investigation of the Rault fire. He said the two agencies have interviewed more than 200 persons and have given polygraph examinations to 35.

"We are not going to close the report as long as we have people we can investigate," Oliver said. "I don't think when six people are killed we should ever say we have closed it out."

Four of those killed were women who plunged from a window on the 15th floor to the roof of a nearby eight-story building. Three of them died in the plunges and another died later. Two men caught in another area of the building also died.

Today's report was the first official one by the fire marshal's office. New

Orleans Fire Supt. Louis San Salvador previously filed a report in which he said the investigation "probably will prove" arson.

Oliver said the presence of the unspecified petroleum-like chemical at the fire scene was confirmed in tests by Shilstone Testing Laboratories of New Orleans.

A member of Oliver's staff said the chemical was in at least one of two cans found on the 15th floor of the building. He said traces of the same chemical tested were found on the

floor only 17 feet from where investigators have determined the fire started.

Frank Locascio, head of the fire marshal's arson division, indicated investigators have run out of leads. "The police and our office are pursuing some things but nothing really concrete at this time," he said.

The fire marshal appealed to the public to report to fire officials any information on the Rault fire.

Oliver also renewed a call for more

Turn to Page 2, Column 1

Continued from Page 1

adequate fire prevention equipment in high-rise buildings.

He said a governor's advisory committee on fire prevention met in Shreveport earlier this week and is considering recommending to the legislature a bill that would require all buildings 50 feet high or higher to have sprinkler systems.

Oliver said sprinkler systems are not the complete answer to fire prevention problems but that they do:

—"Control a fire in its infancy.

—"Cool a building enough to enable the occupants to come out and the firemen to go in."

Oliver said he believes most high rise buildings in New Orleans do not have the "maximum protection they are entitled to."