

5-Point Plan Introduced Fire Fighters' Actions Defended

The New Orleans Fire Fighters Association today defended the actions of firemen in last week's fire at the Rault Center and offered a five-point program to help prevent such fires in high-rise buildings.

The Rault fire left four persons dead and three seriously injured. Three of the victims jumped eight stories to their deaths from the 15th floor of the flaming building.

In a statement issued by association president Clarence J. Perez, the NOFFA strongly disputed an opinion by a Charity Hospital physician that the three women who leaped to their deaths could have been saved by fire department life nets.

DR. PATRICK BREAUX, Charity's assistant clinical director, said he believes the three women would have survived their jumps and that the two critically injured would have been less seriously injured had firemen used the nets.

"The use of life nets under the circumstances," Perez said, "would have been against all the best advice we have available to the New Orleans Fire Department. The judgment of a fire officer can only be based upon the advice and training made available to him. We find no fault with the judgment made by the fire officers on the scene. We fully confirm our faith in our fire chief's decisions and the actions of the fire fighters under their command.

Dr. Breaux, Perez, said, "rendered an ill-advised, personal opinion about the possible effective use of a life net. It makes us wonder, indeed, if Dr. Breaux would be so quick to render personal opinions on judgment decisions made by some of his colleagues."

"WE WELCOME constructive criticism by qualified people. We doubt the judgment of an assistant clinical director rendering an opinion on such an important matter, which could not have possibly served any useful purpose. We doubt the judgment of some members of the press in lending so much credence to an admittedly unqualified opinion."

Perez also disputed a claim by an off-duty postal worker who said he and others

formed a human life net and broke the falls of two of the women who jumped.

This story, Perez said, "has been completely discredited by no less than 20 eye witnesses. Yet the story had the effect of making people wonder why the fire department couldn't have done as much."

Perez said the association's five-point program could "cure many of the ills to many of this city's fire protection problems."

The proposal calls for:

—Proper manpower and equipment for the fire department.

—An adequate training budget.

—Adoption of necessary fire and building codes for the city.

—Vigorous enforcement of those codes "on an impartial basis."

—Automatic sprinkler protection, especially for all high-rise buildings.

Perez said New Orleans fire fighters "do not intend to be the whipping boy each time disaster strikes.

"We've cried out too many times as a voice in the wilderness to no avail. We're critically short of manpower, equipment, training aids and facilities, and finances in general. All of this is true because the city of New Orleans either lacks the funds or has other priorities.

"Each time our organization has requested the inclusion in the budget of more manpower, more safety equipment, better training facilities, or any of the other things we consider priorities, we receive a standard answer from City Hall—'The city only has a certain amount of money to spend on fire protection; if you want us to spend it on manpower and equipment, we won't have any money left to give the fire fighters their next pay raise.'"

Perez said the fire fighters "express their deep sorrow and grief, and share in sympathy" with the families of those who lost their lives or were injured in the Rault fire.

"OUR FAMILIES live daily with the fear that the next alarm may be the last for either their loved ones or some

Fire Officials Seeking Clues Rault Structural Damage Examined

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By LANNY THOMAS

Fire officials today were examining structural damage to the Rault Center in an effort to determine what kind of explosion may have set off a fatal fire there last Wednesday.

The fire left four persons dead and three seriously injured. There have been numerous reports that an explosion preceded the blaze. State Fire Marshal Raymond Oliver said today the nature of an explosion determines the type damage to a structure.

A dynamite explosion, he said, would rise, causing vertical damage, while a gas explosion would spread horizontally.

OLIVER SAID the possibility of arson in the Rault blaze is still under investigation but that no evidence of arson has been uncovered.

He said the investigation may take several weeks because officials are talking with every person they can find who may be able to shed some light on the cause of the fire.

"We don't intend to leave a stone unturned," Oliver said.

Gov. Edwin W. Edwards today called a meeting here for next week to look into the Rault fire.

The meeting will be held

Monday and Tuesday in Oliver's office at the State Office Building.

Sources said the possibility

of new state legislation on fire prevention will be discussed. City and fire officials and safety inspectors have been invited to attend.

IN ADDITION to the state fire marshal's office, New Orleans police and fire department investigators are conducting probes of the fire.

Police said yesterday they have cleared a man who had been sought in connection with the blaze after he allegedly warned a woman in the Rault Center to "get out of the building" before the fire started.

Police said the man voluntarily took a lie detector test after coming to the police and was cleared of any connection with the fire.

THREE OF THE persons who died in the fire were forced to jump from the blazing inferno of the 15th floor to the roof of an adjoining building seven stories below. Two other women survived the fall and remain in Charity Hospital.

A hospital spokesman said today that Mrs. Natalie Smith, 39, 528 Aurora, and Mrs. Wilma Williams, 26, 1724 Caffin Ave., both remain in critical condition.

A third survivor of the fire, Loyd Caldwell, 26, 2704 Whitney Pl., Metairie, who suffered smoke inhalation and burns, is now in good condition, the hospital said.

ALSO YESTERDAY, a security guard booked with the theft of a \$5,000 gold watch from the Rault Center was released on a \$2,500 bond.

Jimmy Ray Gray, 27, 572 Tchoupitoulas St., was released from Parish Prison by Magistrate Robert W. Collins, who set a preliminary hearing for Dec. 15.

Police said the diamond-studded watch has not been recovered, but \$7,500 in other jewels had been. The place of recovery was not identified.

A total of \$25,000 worth of merchandise was reported taken from several apartments, including that of a woman who notified police last week.