

Cameron Reynolds

Attorney At Law
Licensed by the Texas Supreme Court
Not Board Certified
Class of '91

Jim James

Attorney At Law
Board Certified Criminal Law
Class of '75

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Blaze engulfs Venezuelan nightclub 47 die, 12 injured during stampede

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Flames quickly engulfed a tiny, downtown nightclub packed with hundreds of dancers but lacking emergency exits, triggering a panicky stampede and killing 47 people, fire officials and victims said Sunday.

Twelve people were injured in the late Saturday-night blaze at La Guajira discotheque.

Faulty wiring, a kitchen fire or even a carelessly discarded cigarette were all possible causes of the blaze, which erupted near the club's entrance just before midnight Saturday local time, said Fire Chief Rodolfo Briceno. Nearly all the dead succumbed to the smoke.

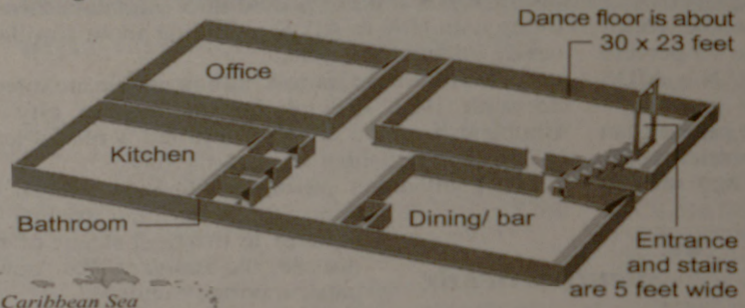
As many as 400 people were inside the discotheque, housed in the basement of the Hotel Venezuela in a densely packed commercial district, when someone yelled "Fire!" victims said.

The club was in two rooms with a total of about 1000 square feet.

"The fire began at the entrance. At first we thought it was a joke, but it seems the fire extinguishers didn't work and the blaze grew fast," said Jenny Cisneros, 29, who suffered burns to her arms and legs.

Caracas nightclub fire kills 47

A fire broke out at an overcrowded basement nightclub just before midnight on Saturday in Caracas, Venezuela.



Between 300 and 400 people were in the nightclub at the time of the fire.

Drawing is schematic
SOURCES: ESRI; Associated Press

"Everything went up in flames. There were so many people, everyone was trampled as they tried to get out. Nobody could breathe," Cisneros told The Associated Press from her hospital bed.

Her sister, who also suffered leg burns, was next to her at the western Caracas clinic. Jenny Cisneros said tearfully that a girlfriend of hers was among the 17 women who died.

Firefighters using oxygen tanks rescued people trapped

inside the club and extinguished the flames early Sunday. They also evacuated another 500 people from the hotel and surrounding buildings inundated by smoke.

At daybreak, grieving relatives and friends stood outside the charred building in a poor district of the Venezuelan capital. The club's blackened, narrow entrance was roped off.

Detectives began the grim task of identifying the dead.

"We have information that

the flames spread quickly in the small building, the escape routes were blocked, contributing to the magnitude of the disaster," Briceno said.

"There were more people in the club than its capacity could hold. There were three or four hundred people there when we arrived, and a lot of that dense toxic smoke."

The combination of overcrowding, no emergency exits, improvised electrical wiring, unlicensed kitchen and fire code inspections is a common one in this city of 4 million, Briceno said. There are not enough resources to monitor hundreds of similar clubs, some of which are open illegally, officials say.

"It's no secret that these types of clubs often have faulty wiring and that their electrical circuits are overloaded," the fire chief said.

"The problem is that these clubs must have enough exits and it isn't always observed," Briceno said, adding that club owners often ignore fire warnings on capacity limits.

Saturday night's fire was the deadliest nightclub blaze in the Venezuelan capital since 1998, when 25 people perished in a discotheque fire, Briceno said.

NEWS IN BRIEF

CBS producer who hired Rather dies

NEW YORK (AP) — Ernest Leiser, a CBS News producer who hired the network's current anchor, Dan Rather, died Tuesday of an apparent heart attack. He was 81.

During his 29-year career, Leiser reported mostly from Europe, where he was jailed briefly by communists while covering the revolt in Hungary in 1956.

In 1964, he was named director of the news division, where he hired Rather, and later became executive producer of the "CBS Evening News With Walter Cronkite."

He left CBS to become an executive producer at ABC News in 1972, but returned in 1975 to head the CBS News department covering political conventions and elections. He retired in 1985, but remained active in journalism through teaching.

Leiser was born in

Philadelphia and graduated from the University of Chicago in 1941. He served in the Army from 1942-1946 and was a correspondent for Stars & Stripes.

Peugeot of Peugeot carmakers dies at 70

PARIS (AP) — Pierre Peugeot, chairman of the supervisory board of French car maker Peugeot SA, died Sunday. He was 70.

Peugeot was a member of the company's board of directors from 1972 to 1988, during which time he helped shape the group's strategy and expand sales, the company said in a statement. He had been chairman of the supervisory board since 1988.

Supervisory board vice-chairman Jean Boillot will stand in for Peugeot until a new chairman is named, the statement said. The car maker, which first started producing automobiles in the late 19th century, is 28 percent owned by the Peugeot family.

First American Indian in space was 'amazed'

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — After completing three spacewalks in five days, astronaut John Herrington got a chance to relax Sunday and reflect on what it was like to hurtle around Earth at 17,500 mph — outside his spaceship.

He couldn't help but think: "That's a loooong way down."

Herrington said he was somewhat intimidated by the fact that at any moment, he might find himself in uncontrollable motion and break away from the international space station, which would be "a bad thing."

"So I was always constantly on guard that I was maintaining the best control I could and that I had my proper tether protocol," he said. "But it was very awe-inspiring. It's a beautiful sight to look down and see the Earth from this altitude."

Herrington, the first American Indian in space and a member of the Chickasaw Nation, helped NASA get a stalled space station railcar moving again during his final spacewalk of the mission Saturday. In his two earlier outings, he helped install a \$390 million station girder that was delivered by space shuttle Endeavour.

His one-week visit to the space station will end Monday

"It's a beautiful sight to look down and see the earth from this altitude."

— John Herrington, first American Indian in space

afternoon, when Endeavour undocks and heads back to Earth for a Wednesday touchdown. The shuttle will return three former space station residents who have been in orbit since early June.

In an interview with *Nation's Country Today*, Herrington said the first time he looked out Endeavour's windows after blasting off Nov. 23, he was amazed at how massive the Earth was — and how minute the atmosphere. It made him realize "how insignificant we are in the grand scheme of things."

Herrington said flying in space — and doing productive work up there — probably is the most fulfilling thing he's ever done in his career.

The Texas A&M University Student Media Board is accepting applications for

Editor THE BATTALION

— Including radio and online editions —
Spring 2003

(The spring editor will serve from Jan. 6 through May 9, 2003)

Qualifications for editor in chief of *The Battalion* are:

- Be a Texas A&M student in good standing with the University and enrolled in at least six credit hours (4 if a graduate student) during the term of office (unless fewer credits are required to graduate);
- Have at least a 2.00 cumulative grade point ratio (3.00 if a graduate student) and at least a 2.00 grade point ratio (3.00 if a graduate student) in the semester immediately prior to the appointment, the semester of appointment and semester during the term of office. In order for this provision to be met, at least six hours (4 if a graduate student) must have been taken for that semester;
- Have completed JOUR 301 (Mass Communication, Law and Society), or equivalent;
- Have at least one year experience in a responsible editorial position on *The Battalion* or comparable daily college newspaper, — OR — Have at least one year editorial experience on a commercial newspaper, — OR — Have completed at least 12 hours journalism, including JOUR 203 and 303 (Media Writing I and II), and JOUR 304 (Editing for the Mass Media), or equivalent.

Application forms should be picked up and returned to Dell Bonmiske, Student Media business coordinator, in room 011A Reed McDonald Building. Deadline for submitting application: noon Tuesday, Dec. 3, 2002. Applicants will be interviewed during the Student Media Board Meeting beginning at 10 a.m. Friday, Dec. 6, in room 221F Reed McDonald.

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