

Fire at Moscow dormitory for foreign students kills 36

By Vladimir Isachenkov
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MOSCOW — A pre-dawn fire swept through a rundown Russian dormitory for quarantined foreign students Monday, trapping many behind permanently locked exits and causing some to leap from the five-story building.

Thirty-six students died and nearly 200 were injured, some from frostbite after fleeing half naked into the bitter cold. The students — from Asia, Africa and Latin America — had just arrived in Moscow and were being held in the dorm awaiting medical checks before starting classes.

"It was like a horrible nightmare," Abdallah Bong, a student from Chad. "We saw them crying

for help and jumping out of the windows, and we could do nothing to save them."

Bong and other witnesses said dozens of fire engines were slow to reach the blaze, jammed into a narrow access road blocked by parked cars.

"Students had to do it all themselves, holding mattresses for those who were jumping out," said Nafate Tengna, a journalism student from Guinea.

The fire, believed to have been caused by an electrical malfunction, engulfed the building at People's Friendship University. It burned for more than three hours, though Moscow fire safety department spokesman Yevgeny Boblyov insisted that firefighters arrived on time and did their job well.

Flames gutted most of the dorm above the ground

floor. Smoke poured from windows as a wet snow fell in the early morning darkness. The fire left the building's concrete walls streaked with black soot, and nearby trees were caked with ice that had formed from water used to extinguish the blaze.

Once a showpiece of Soviet patronage of the Third World, receiving generous state subsidies, the university declined with the 1991 fall of communism. Still, it continued to draw students from impoverished nations with its low tuition, such as medical school costs of \$1,200 a year.

Students said the dead and injured included citizens of China, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Tahiti, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Angola, Ivory Coast, Morocco, Kazakhstan, the Dominican Republic, Lebanon, Peru and Malaysia.

Lubov Zhomova of the Moscow Fire Directorate said 36 people died and 197 others were injured — 57 of them in serious or grave condition.

A preliminary investigation pointed to an electrical problem, Deputy Interior Minister Nikolai Nurgaliyev told President Vladimir Putin. He inquired about the fire during a Cabinet session. Some bystanders said the fire could have been started by electric heaters, which students were not allowed to use.

The university was founded in 1960 and named for Patrice Lumumba, Congo's first prime minister; its name was changed in 1992. It was to offer a strict Marxist curriculum to students from developing nations.

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