



LATIN AMERICA & CARIBBEAN

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Six dead after Rio de Janeiro building collapse

Rescue workers searching rubble from the collapse of three buildings in Rio de Janeiro have found six bodies while at least 16 people remain missing.

They said it was unlikely many others would be found alive under the debris in the Brazilian city.

Officials are investigating if illegal building works caused structural problems that led to the collapse.

The buildings, one of which was 20 storeys, collapsed late on Wednesday.

The buildings were located near the Municipal Theatre and the headquarters of oil giant Petrobras.

Dozens of emergency workers attended the scene and police cordoned off the area.

Concerns have been raised about the state of Rio de Janeiro's infrastructure as Brazil prepares to host football's World Cup in 2014 and the Olympic Games two years later.

'Turned to dust'

Janitor Marcelo Moreira, who was working in one of the buildings, was one of the survivors, the Associated Press reported.

His friend Rosalvo Alves, who had worked in the same building for 38 years, said: "He stayed behind to finish a little bit of work. I left and he was supposed to come too."

"Now he's hurt, our jobs are gone, everything is gone."

Friends and relatives of the missing remain at the scene waiting for news but rescue workers have toned down their originally hope that most people would be found alive.

Cafe owner Marcelo de Souza said his livelihood had been destroyed and his possessions had "turned to dust", the Associated Press reported.

Rio de Janeiro conservation and public services secretary, Carlos Osorio, said the mayor's office had quickly provided everything needed to help the rescue effort.

Luiz Cosenza, a building inspector with Rio de Janeiro's Regional Council of Engineering, told Brazil's Globo television network that he feared illegal projects in one of the buildings could have been a factor, AFP reported.

Mr Cosenza said: "Two projects were happening in the building, on the 16th floor. They were illegal works - they were not registered with the council."

Hugh Oliver, who was in the area when the collapse happened, told the BBC the situation was surreal.

"The city quickly filled with rescue vehicles and there was a lot of helicopter activity. The dust cloud hung around for a long time," he said.

Mr Oliver said he was not surprised by the falling building and said: "The infrastructure is poor - only areas such as Barra de Tijuca are modern and well regulated, but behind the main streets in the centre of Rio there are crumbling dirty sidestreets where safety is not the top priority."

Engineers say age is unlikely to have been the cause of the buildings' collapse.

Professor Paulo Roberto do Lago Helene, from the civil engineering school of the University of Sao Paulo, says Brazil still lacks legislation ordering owners to periodically examine the condition of their buildings.

"Those buildings in central Rio are getting old and more attention has to be paid to their maintenance. I don't think there is widespread risk yet but this is certainly an important early warning that we should be looking into this issue", he said.

"New York enacted similar legislation about 20 years ago when a couple of buildings collapsed there."

The incident comes a little over three months after a suspected gas explosion at a restaurant in the city left three people dead.

Are you in Rio de Janeiro? Did you witness the incident? Please get in touch using the form below.

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