

Beat: Travel

Zuma: 67 South Africans dead in Nigerian church collapse

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USPA News - Sixty-seven South Africans died and scores were injured when a church building collapsed in the Nigerian city of Lagos last week, South Africa's President Jacob Zuma said on Tuesday, indicating that the total number of casualties may be far higher than previously thought. The accident happened at around 12:44 p.m. local time on Friday when a five-story guest house collapsed in the Lagos complex of the Synagogue Church of All Nations, which is headed by T. B. Joshua.

Nigerian officials raised the death toll to 60 by Tuesday afternoon, but Zuma said no less than 67 South African nationals were among the victims. "This is a particularly difficult time for South Africa. Not in the recent history of our country have we had this large number of our people die in one incident outside the country," Zuma said. "Our thoughts are with the families, friends and colleagues that have lost their loved ones in this heartbreaking tragedy. The whole nation shares the pain of the mothers, fathers, daughters and sons who have lost their loved ones. We are all in grief." Nelson Kgwete, a spokesman for South Africa's Department of International Relations and Cooperation, said at least five South African church tour groups were at the complex at the time of the collapse. He said officials from the South African Mission in Lagos were liaising with rescue workers at the scene to assess the situation. "As we mourn this sudden and tragic death of our fellow compatriots, I have directed the relevant Government departments and entities to act with the utmost urgency to ensure that we facilitate the movement of relevant family members to Nigeria to identify the bodies of their loved ones and to ensure that we repatriate the remains as soon as possible under the circumstances," the president added. Zuma also extended his condolences to the people of Nigeria and "all other nations affected by this tragedy," indicating that the death toll may increase further with victims from other countries. A spokesperson for Nigeria's National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) did not immediately respond to a request to clarify the casualty figures. The increased death toll came just hours after Nigerian officials said a middle-aged woman was rescued from the rubble on early Tuesday morning, nearly four days after the collapse. Authorities earlier said a total of 130 people had been rescued alive from the rubble in the hours after the collapse, but it remains unclear how many people were inside the foreign guest house. T. B. Joshua initially suggested that the collapse was caused by sabotage, pointing to a small aircraft which hovered over the building several times just before the collapse, but investigators have dismissed those claims, saying improper construction was likely the cause. They said two floors were being added to the building without fortification of the initial foundation.

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