



A firefighter stands in front of the burning NCCC Mall in Davao City on Saturday. Inset shows President Duterte reacting as he arrives at the mall. AFP

37 dead in Davao City mall fire

By EDITH REGALADO

DAVAO CITY – At least 37 people, including call center staff from American firm SSI, are believed to have perished

in a fire that engulfed a shopping mall here from Saturday morning until early dawn yesterday.

Firemen found one body as the blaze was brought under

control, President Duterte's daughter and Mayor Sara Duterte-Carpio told reporters.

Davao City Police Office director Senior Superintendent Alexander Tagum said the

body was found inside a toilet on the fourth floor of the mall where the SSI call center was located.

The fire broke out while the **Turn to Page 6**

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city was also being battered by Tropical Storm Vinta, which caused flooding and forced residents to evacuate. Vinta also caused deaths in Mindanao areas more than a week after Urduja devastated provinces in the Visayas as well.

The President, who has been mayor of this city for a long time before he became Chief Executive, broke down in tears as he visited distraught relatives outside the burning building to personally tell them there was "zero" chance their loved ones had survived.

Firemen have concluded that all those trapped in the building are dead, Carpio said, adding: "They assessed that no one would survive in that heat and with that thick, black smoke."

The blaze started at the four-story NCCC Mall at around 9:30 a.m. on Saturday, sending thick plumes of black smoke billowing into the sky until press time yesterday

afternoon.

Based on information from the Bureau of Fire Protection, fire and arson investigator Senior Fire Officer 4 Ramil Gillado, the fire was declared under control at 8:20 a.m. but not totally out because there was still smoke coming out of the mall.

Built in 2003, the mall is one of the city's first big establishments owned by the Lim family.

In consoling the relatives of those missing, the President was joined by Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines president and Davao Archbishop Romulo Valles, Carpio, son and Vice Mayor Paolo Duterte and presidential special assistant Christopher Go, priests, nuns, fire officials and local government personnel.

Known for his strongman image and tough talk, Duterte wept and dried his tears with a white handkerchief in front

of the public.

In a statement, presidential spokesman Harry Roque said "our thoughts and prayers" are with the families of those missing.

Roque said the President went unannounced on Saturday night to assure the relatives of the victims that the government would extend help.

"The Bureau of Fire Protection is currently determining the cause of the fire and the extent of the damage. Let us include them in our prayers in this moment of grief," Roque said.

The NCCC Mall management, for its part, said it was deeply affected by the incident that "caused lives to be lost."

"We have been in constant coordination with the BFP ever since the incident broke out. As of this time, the fire fighting and retrieval operations are still ongoing," the management said.

"NCCC is also awaiting for the official report from BFP. Rest assured every effort is be-

ing exerted to keep everybody informed. Details will be released in a press briefing right after BFP declares fire out and releases their official report," it added.

Hoping against hope

Jimmy Quimsing, a retired seaman, was one of the relatives desperately waiting for news.

His 25-year-old son Jim Benedict worked at the call center and had not been in contact since the fire broke out.

Quimsing said he spoke to the President and had been told to prepare for the worst.

"He told us zero, no one would survive under these circumstances," he told *Agence France-Presse*.

Go confirmed the bulk of the conversation to AFP.

The vice mayor also wrote on Facebook that fire officials had told him there was "zero" chance of anyone trapped surviving the blaze.

– With Christina Mendez, Alexis Romero, AFP