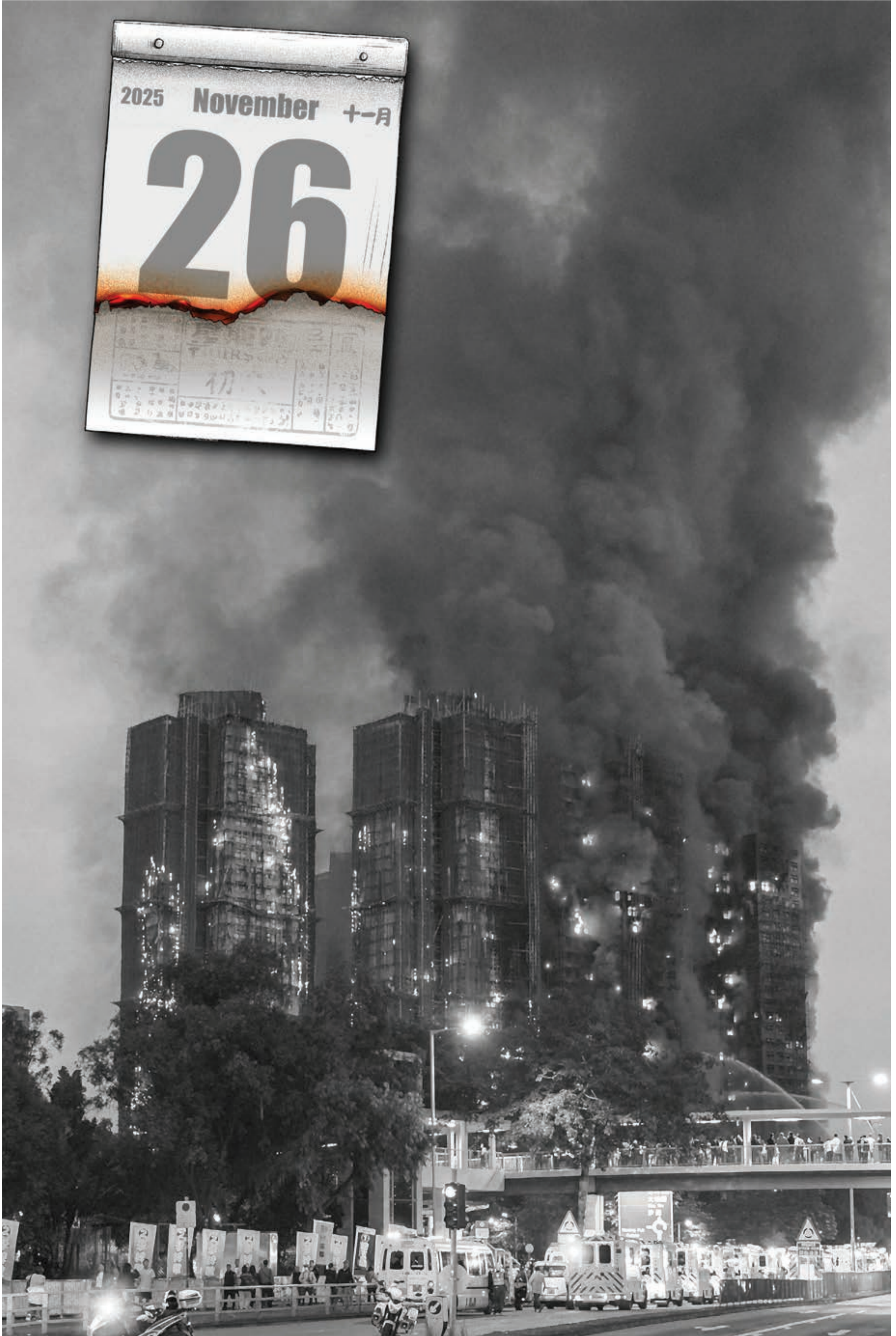




From ashes, strength

■ A SOUTH CHINA MORNING POST SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT



The extraordinary

In November in Hong Kong, the sweltering humid summer makes a retreat as the weather cools and people look to planning a holiday abroad or preparing for the Christmas, New Year and Lunar New Year festivities to come. But on the afternoon of November 26, tragedy loomed as a fire that began with a No 1 alarm – meaning minimal threat – escalated into the highest danger level of No 5 in less than four hours when it became apparent the blaze was raging out of control. The fire ravaged seven out of the eight blocks of Wang Fuk Court and kept burning for 43 hours before it was finally tamed. By yesterday, the death toll had reached 128 and scores remained unaccounted for. Some 89 bodies were “unidentifiable”, meaning they were likely burnt beyond recognition. The work to identify them will take weeks if not months, officials warned, and the rebuilding of homes and broken lives even longer. Christmas and the

Outpouring of love and longing for fallen firefighter

Family and friends of Ho Wai-ho post heartfelt messages as top officials also offer condolences

Jess Ma
jess.ma@scmp.com

Loved ones of the firefighter who died battling the high-rise inferno have shared their feelings of grief mixed with pride, hailing him a hero for his selfless sacrifice and devotion to duty.

Family and friends of Ho Wai-ho, 37, posted heartfelt messages on social media, while top city officials also offered their condolences as the city mourned.

“I really, really want to be able to hold your hand again,” Ho’s girlfriend wrote the day after he died, adding that she “could not accept” what had happened and wished to “take a break” from the internet.

Ho was pronounced dead at Prince of Wales Hospital at 4.45pm on Wednesday – nearly 45 minutes after he was found with burns to his face on the ground floor of Wang Cheong House in Wang Fuk Court. The No 5 alarm blaze has so far claimed more than 100 lives and left scores injured, while full-scale recovery operations are still under way at the Tai Po estate.

Ho had served in the Fire Services Department for nine years and was stationed at Sha Tin Fire Station when he was dispatched to the blaze as a team member of a light rescue unit. He arrived at the scene at 3.01pm to combat the blaze on the ground floor, but lost contact with his colleagues at 3.30pm.

His girlfriend expressed pride in Ho’s dedication to duty, calling him a “superhero”. “My superhero has finished his mission and returned to Krypton. You’re my pride!” she wrote.

Social media users reacted to her post with a flood of messages expressing their sympathy, calling Ho a hero in an emotional show of solidarity. “He isn’t just your superhero, he’s also our superhero. [It’s] OK to not be OK, take care,” another user wrote.

Support has continued to grow for Ho’s girlfriend, and there were more than 14,500 comments in response to her social media post as of Friday night. Among them were celebrities such as boy band Mirror members Stanley Yau

Sze-chun and Anson Kong Yip-sang, as well as Marie Yau Yin-tung, member of girl group Collar.

On Wednesday, Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu told how he was deeply saddened by the number of deaths and injuries, including the loss of a firefighter on duty. He extended his deepest condolences to the families of the dead and injured.

Secretary for Security Chris Tang Ping-keung also extended his sympathy. “I am profoundly grieved at the passing of Mr Ho, who lost his life in the course of an operation. I offer my deepest condolences to his family members,” Tang said.

Secretary for the Civil Service Ingrid Yeung Ho Pui-yan was another to express their deepest sorrow. “I pay solemn tribute to Mr Ho for his gallantry and selfless devotion to duty, and express the deepest condolences to his family on behalf of the civil service,” Yeung said. “The Civil Service Bureau had contacted the Fire Services Department to ensure every effort was made to help his family.

On social media, another user, who referred to Ho as “brother”, wrote a post on Wednesday remembering the firefighter before deleting it after it went viral. “[Your] shift’s over, please rest well bro,” it said. The message also included a photo of Ho in uniform and began, “Please remember well what a hero looks like”, and thanked the firefighter for his sacrifice. “Brothers from Yan Oi Tong are all proud of you. See you in our next lives, gorilla.” It concluded: “A woman, who identified herself as a younger cousin, also shared her sorrow on social media, expressing disbelief and longing for Ho. “When I was young, I found you annoying and pretentious, but now I think you’re incredibly cool. You’re the coolest...” she wrote. “But I don’t want to feel you’re cool because of this...”

News of her cousin’s death had shocked her, she said, and she wished he could have returned safely from duty. The post similarly sparked an outpouring of kind online messages, with some users revealing their own connections to the firefighter.



Ho Wai-ho, 37, has been hailed a hero for his sacrifice. Photo: Handout



My superhero has finished his mission and returned to Krypton. You're my pride!

GIRLFRIEND OF HO WAI-HO

heroes of Hong Kong

new years will be difficult for the survivors. Amid the tragedy, however, there were stories of hope and heroism among the city’s regular residents. There was the firefighter who was among the first responders to rush to the scene soon after the fire broke out at 2.52pm. He died less than an hour later, overwhelmed by the flames. He was one of the more than 2,300 personnel deployed around the clock to put out the fire and rescue survivors. Then there were the residents who knocked on neighbours’ doors to alert them to the flames. There were stories of others who took in strangers or guided them out and helped the elderly to leave the buildings first, and then there were the foreign domestic helpers who stayed until the end to make sure their charges were safe. These are the extraordinary stories of the ordinary heroes of Hong Kong. On these pages, we mourn those who died and honour those who survived.

Father saves iPad and phone for children, but neighbours have more reasons to be thankful

Willa Wu
willa.wu@scmp.com

Watching his young children’s faces light up with excitement, William Li felt relief but the deep ache in his chest was overwhelming.

His son and daughter were happy he had saved their most treasured possessions – a mobile phone and an iPad – from the inferno that had just devoured their home in Wang Fuk Court on Wednesday. Thankfully, they had been at school and their mother at work at the time.

“Daddy is so great! You saved my phone!” his 10-year-old son exclaimed, cheering with his sister, seven.

They remained blissfully unaware of their father’s trembling voice and their mother’s tense, frozen expression.

Their entire life – carefully built over the years – had vanished in hours. All that remained were the two electronic devices and a few thousand Hong Kong dollars.

“People say you can always start over as long as you’re alive,” Li, 40, said. “But I wonder how? How can one start over if he has nothing at hand?”

The blaze that engulfed seven of the eight buildings at the residential complex in Tai Po left more than 100 dead and 79 injured. About 150 people remain unaccounted for, and Secretary for Security Chris Tang Ping-keung has warned that more bodies may be found as recovery work continues.

The complex was undergoing renovation and surrounded by bamboo scaffolding and protective green mesh nets, which might have accelerated the spread of the flames.

Recalling his escape from the family’s second-floor flat at Wang Cheong House, Li stressed he had heard no fire alarm.

“When my distraught wife called and urged me to escape from our home, I thought she was overreacting. But I was proven wrong,” Li said.

Eight minutes after the call, he opened the front door of the flat only to be hit by a cloud of thick smoke. He shut the door immediately.

“I coughed so hard. I called my wife, telling her I can’t get out due to the smoke. She cried too hard to utter a word,” Li said.

Racing against time, he wedged wet towels into the gaps around doors and windows, desperately trying to keep the smoke at bay.

But then he heard calls for help coming from the corridor.

When he opened the door again, the corridor was filled with black smoke, the cries for help faint in the darkness.

Guided by the sound of their calls, Li managed to grab the hands of a couple living on the same floor and took them back to his flat.

The couple, in their 50s, struggled for breath. Li knew they needed to escape, but how?

Wang Cheong House, where the fire appears to have started, was designed with two emergency exits. One went through the lobby to the front of the building and the other used the stairs next to his flat that led to the rear exit of the structure. He knew it took about one minute to get outside using either one.

But the lobby was on fire, and the couple told him the rear exit was locked. Li refused to give up and asked if they were willing to jump from the window. “My flat was on the second floor. If we jumped, we might break our legs or arms, but the chance of surviving was better,” he said.

They looked at the bamboo scaffolding outside the window and saw it was on fire, with debris falling from above.

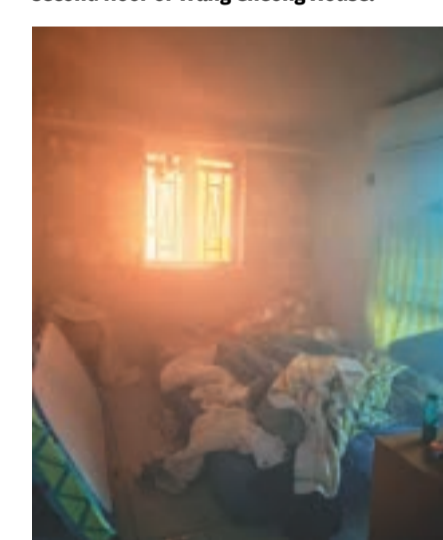
needlessly. The process of worrying is terrifying – it’s an agonising journey.”

At around 6pm, three hours after Li received his wife’s call, firefighters arrived. They rescued the three residents one by one from the windows using a ladder.

As he waited for his turn to climb out, Li took one last look at his flat and the hundreds of objects collected over the years that had helped make it a home: meticulously assembled toy models that had consumed countless evenings, photographs chronicling a lifetime of precious moments. What should he save?



William Li, 40, lived with his family on the second floor of Wang Cheong House.



Li’s flat is lit by the flames from burning scaffolding before he was led to safety.

“I don’t want people calling me that,” he insisted. “I am not. The couple had told me there was someone outside calling for help from her employer. But I did not dare go out again. I am not a hero.

“The true heroes are our firefighters.”

“Do I still have a place called home?” he asked himself.

Li’s account of his escape, which he shared on social media, drew comments from others praising him as “a selfless hero”.

“I didn’t want them to worry

Moments of despair and valour

Clockwise from above: a 71-year-old man surnamed Wong cries out for his wife who he feared was trapped in one of the towers at Wang Fuk Court; Beijing’s liaison office chief Zhou Ji speaks to an injured firefighter at Pok Oi Hospital in Yuen Long; weary firefighters make their way back to their truck after battling the blaze; smoke and burning embers rise into the air as fires rage across the towers at the Tai Po estate. Photos: Sam Tsang; Handout, Elson Li, Eugene Lee



'She kept crying for me to rescue her'

Elderly people and children were among the main casualties of the Wang Fuk Court fire – and family members recount their agonising search for news of their relatives' survival

Jeffie Lam
jeffie.lam@scmp.com

The eight milk-tea-coloured towers of Wang Fuk Court were special sentinels to many locals in Tai Po district. Residents said that whenever they saw the blocks emerging into view on the side of Tolo Highway on their daily commute after work, they knew they were back home. Home was their idyllic estate with its winding bicycle lanes and a canal bisecting it, far from the frenzy of Kowloon. But now the landmark is blanketed by black soot, battered bamboo and frayed strands of green netting after a fire set seven of the eight blocks in the cluster ablaze, making the tragedy Hong Kong's deadliest conflagration in seven decades.

Built in 1983, Wang Fuk Court was under the then-colonial government's Home Ownership Scheme, which sells subsidised public housing flats to eligible low- or middle-income families at a significant discount on market prices.

The 1,984 two-bedroom flats, sized from 431 to 485 sq ft, were heavily sought-after by many young families earning less than the monthly income limit of HK\$6,500 back then who could not afford a unit on the private market, and many others who were longing to move up the social ladder and leave their public rental homes.

I have been to the temporary shelters and hospitals, but I have not heard anything

MRS YEUNG, 70, TRYING TO CONFIRM THE FATE OF HER ELDERLY SISTER WHO LIVED ALONE IN WANG CHEONG HOUSE

Forty-two years on, residents of Wang Fuk Court – a home where their children were born, grew up, married and moved out – have aged along with the estate. Many homeowners who were in their prime of life back then are now grey-haired and, until this week, were living alone or with domestic helpers hired to take care of them.

The blaze erupted at 2:52pm on Wednesday, at a time when most working adults and children were either at their jobs or in school. Many elderly people were at home with their helpers or their young grandchildren. They appear to be the main victims of the fire.

Desperate mother Winnie Hui posted more than a dozen times on different social media platforms after the fire began, calling on people to rescue her six-month-old baby girl Ho Tsz-yan, who was with her 68-year-old grandmother Li Kin-yuk at her flat in Wang Cheong House, the block that first caught fire.

In her last call with Hui at 3:02pm, Li said there was smoke outside and she would move to another flat on the same floor. Contact was lost soon after. Her 75-year-old husband was also missing.

After more than 30 hours of searching, Hui broke down outside a temporary shelter after she heard her baby had died in the blaze. "My baby is dead. I am the mum who keeps posting non-stop on

social media trying to find my baby," she sobbed.

"I cannot find my father-in-law or mother-in-law either. The firefighters said they found a baby and an adult in the flat with no signs of life. I don't know what to do. My baby was born after so much hardship."

Authorities have been displaying an album of photos showing charred bodies for families to identify loved ones at the Kwong Fuk Community Hall since Thursday. Dozens have been queuing in an orderly line. Over the hours and days, many could be seen leaving the hall, sobbing uncontrollably as they were helped along by relatives while others left silently, their faces wet with tears.

Someone in the crowd said the albums included many photos of young children. A woman surmised Cheung who left the hall repeated the observation to the Post.

"I can't describe the feeling [when looking at the album]. There are so many [photos] of children," said Cheung, who could not identify her missing sister and brother-in-law from the 23rd floor of Wang Cheong House.

A 50-year-old woman surmised Yeung came to the hall to identify the body of her elder sister. The body was heavily burned, she said, teary-eyed. The face was nearly unrecognisable, but firefighters had found her inside the flat, making the identification easier.

Yeung recalled how her sister, whose age she did not disclose, had called her after the fire first started, begging for help.

"She called me when the fire just broke out and asked me for help. It was just 10 minutes and the fire had already reached her home," she said. "She kept crying for me to rescue her. I had already called police and told them her flat number, but still couldn't save her."

Secretary for Security Chris Tang Ping-keung said on Friday the death toll had risen to 128. About 200 people were in "situations" that were unclear, with 89 bodies unidentifiable. Those still awaiting news of their loved ones said that every passing hour was more unbearable as the chances of survival grew more unlikely.

A 70-year-old woman, who identified herself as Mrs Yeung, was struggling on Friday to confirm the fate of her elderly sister, who lived alone on the 16th floor of Wang Cheong House.

"I have been to the temporary shelters and hospitals, but I have not heard anything," she said, bursting into tears. "So I prepared for the worst and came here, but I still have not found her."

Some families have been going to Prince of Wales Hospital in Sha Tin to try to locate their friends and family members. On Thursday, 76-year-old Lam, who lost his 80-year-old brother in the fire, was searching for his sister-in-law and nephew. They lived together in the same flat in Wang Cheong House. Hospital staff told him there were no admission records for either of them. Lam said: "We don't know whether we should hold a funeral for one or for three."

Before the fire, Wang Fuk Court residents had been living for more than 1½ years with bamboo scaffolding and netting encasing their blocks. Many had their windows boarded up with styrofoam as part of renovation work that was meant to give the estate a new lease on life.

Now the sentinels of Tai Po stand scarred, a reminder of the day of death and devastation.



Tears for the loved ones lost

Clockwise from above: a woman weeps after identifying a relative killed in the blaze; a firefighter carefully carries a rescued dog; a grief-stricken woman waits for news of loved ones at CCC Fung Leung Kit Memorial Secondary School; ambulance personnel take an injured person on a stretcher as the body of a

victim is loaded onto a van for transfer to a mortuary; crewmates of firefighter Ho Wai-bo, who died, arrive at Prince of Wales Hospital, Sha Tin; and two women comfort each other as they leave Kwong Fuk Community Hall after identifying a deceased relative. Photos: Sam Tsang; Eugene Lee; Edmond So



People comfort each other after identifying relatives through photos of bodies kept in official albums at Kwong Fuk Community Hall near Wang Fuk Court. Photo: Sam Tsang

Lessons to be learned from day of heartbreak

As questions of accountability emerge, experts call for much tighter supervision of building maintenance and fire safety, including regulations on the use of certain materials and tough new legislation that establishes specific responsibilities for duty holders to manage risks

Edith Lin
edith.lin@scmp.com

As Hong Kong mourns the victims of the deadly Tai Po blaze and questions emerge on accountability, experts have called for much tighter supervision of building maintenance and fire safety by authorities to hold relevant parties responsible so that future tragedies can be averted.

They gave this assessment as the government set up an interdepartmental task force to probe Wednesday's fire, including the cause, the reasons it spread so quickly and the factors leading to the heavy casualties.

The fire that ravaged seven out of the eight blocks at Wang Fuk Court, which was undergoing renovation, claimed more than 100 lives. Among the dead, a number of bodies have been deemed "unidentifiable", suggesting they were burned beyond recognition.

Preliminary investigations found the blaze started on protective nets covering scaffolding at Wang Cheung House and was intensified by styrofoam, with fire alarms in all eight blocks malfunctioning.

Initial tests showed that the nets at Wang Fuk Court complied with fire-retardant requirements, but styrofoam boards in Wang Chi House, the only block unaffected by the blaze, were found to be flammable.



The blaze was intensified by styrofoam, while fire alarms in all blocks malfunctioned. Photo: Eugene Lee

Maintenance projects rely on consultants and contractors to be self-disciplined

YAU YUNG, LINGNAN UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR

Citywide checks, ordered by Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu, of buildings undergoing facade maintenance with protective nets found two of 127 blocks contained styrofoam and their removal was ordered.

This was the status report of the inspections, as of Friday at 5pm. Authorities were also considering taking legal action over the two towers.

A construction sector insider, who declined to be named, said polystyrene foam boards were sometimes used in renovation to protect windows from being damaged, but added it should only be applied on a few floors at a time and removed immediately after the work was completed.

The source said the contractor may have chosen to use foam, which was cheaper than other protection materials to control costs. Placing foam boards in all eight blocks at once could allow them to collect payment for this procedure first.

Lawrence Ng San-wa, permanent honorary president of the Hong Kong Construction Sub-Contractors Association, said he believed the problem lay with the polystyrene foam boards rather than the safety nets.

"Although flame-retardant nets are more expensive by percentage, the sum is not big after all. Everyone understands that once it catches fire, the loss would only be bigger," he said.

"As the polyfoam helped conduct heat, the windows broke, and the fire entered the units. If there was no polyfoam, the damage should not be as serious."

Vincent Ho Kui-yip, the president of the Hong Kong Institute of Building Safety, said that while

there were rules governing the fire-retardant performance of protective nets, none existed for polystyrene foam boards or styrofoam.

He suggested the cost of more expensive fire-retardant styrofoam products may have deterred contractors from using them.

Ho urged authorities to consider regulating such materials, among other critical causes of concern identified in the citywide inspections, as it was impractical to regulate every kind of work or material.

He also called for supervision of building maintenance works to be stepped up, as the Buildings Department currently exempted most projects from seeking approval before work began.

It only required the submission of documents after the task was finished.

"It is time to standardise the procedures for large-scale maintenance involving an entire building or several buildings," Ho said.

"They should at least submit records of key procedures for the authorities to keep track of them. Authorities will then be able to hold them liable, and it can deter the sector from cutting corners."

Ho also called for the setting up of a designated statutory body to coordinate large-scale building maintenance and repair works in the long run, after some homeowners might be worried about liability.

Chau Sze-kit, president of the Hong Kong Construction Industry Employees General Union, said the sector and stakeholders, including homeowners, should learn from the tragedy to enhance safety surveillance.

The government should focus more on inspection and prosecution for unsafe practices in the near future, as it would take a longer time for laws to be amended, Chau added.

Professor Yau Yung from Lingnan University, a professional member of Britain's Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, agreed the government should fill the gap in its code of practice on the use of styrofoam, while also closing other loopholes.

"Currently, Buildings Department inspections focus on massive construction sites involving buildings under construction. Maintenance projects rely on consultants and contractors to be self-disciplined," Yau said.

"If the government is willing to step up inspections, prosecute those who contravene the law in a high-profile manner to warn the sector, the sector will naturally be more disciplined."

The Labour Department had previously received and followed up on complaints about the safety nets at Wang Fuk Court, but Yau said it might not be something under the agency's scope of work as it was focused on occupational safety, while the Buildings Department was concerned with structural and materials safety.

You said authorities could set up a centralised body to deal with the complaints, enhance training for hotline staff and increase public education.

He also said the government should step up caretakers' preparedness for emergencies in an ageing society, especially for domestic workers who might not be familiar with evacuation procedures in high-rise buildings.

Lee Kwong-sing, chairman of the Hong Kong Institute of Safety Practitioner, hoped that the government would explore the possibility of stipulating the installation of a fire warning system and safety equipment in scaffolding used at buildings undergoing large-scale maintenance.

Lee also called for the presence of an on-site safety officer at large-scale building maintenance projects who could carry out checks and rectify improper practices.

Property management companies should take a bigger role in the maintenance work and its supervision, he added.

There was also need to have a new law on construction design and management, which established specific responsibilities for duty holders, such as the designer and contractor, to manage risks.

"There is no specific law targeting designers of the scaffolding and work procedures. The impact of such a law will be greater than increasing the inspection frequency of the Fire Services Department," he said.

Looking ahead, Anthony Lam Chun-man, a former director of the Fire Services Department, said the public should ensure they knew about fire safety, including the use of equipment and evacuation routes.

Lam added that owners should also monitor their buildings' compliance with fire safety rules, as fire service installations and equipment should be inspected at least once a year.



Helping hands

Clockwise from above: donations of clothes, food and other items are sorted at Kwong Fuk Estate for those affected by the tragedy; a lone firefighter walks through a devastated landscape; Chief Executive John Lee talks to firefighters at the scene; and a young volunteer is only too happy to share lollipops. Photos: Karma Lo, Elson Li, Handout



Hong Kong spirit still shines bright at darkest of times

Overwhelming public reaction to tragedy puts paid to fears unique bond may have been lost

Natalie Wong
natalie.wong@scmp.com

As despair draped the air and hopes dimmed for the scores still unaccounted for, one scene stood out on the second night after Hong Kong's deadliest fire in decades: volunteers forming long human chains next to the charred buildings in Tai Po, passing on supplies hand to hand.

These volunteers – mobilised mostly through social media and chat groups – moved the supplies contributed by individuals and businesses to where hundreds of affected residents were staying temporarily. Working tirelessly overnight, they dived the plaza next to the scene of disaster into zones and organised the items systematically.

Daily necessities of every kind could be found at the various booths. Clothing and pillows were folded neatly and sorted by size, and a recycling booth was also set up in the middle of the space, giving it a feel of a flea market. Pets were also not forgotten as a station packed to the gills with dog, cat and bird food opened up.

Some could not help but draw comparisons to 2019 when Hong Kong people suddenly decided to volunteer in droves. In recent years, after the city's political changes, analysts wondered if civil society would weaken and citizens would retreat into their private lives.

The tragedy in Tai Po put paid to such worries. After the blaze began unleashing its wrath on Wednesday afternoon and ravaged seven out of the eight blocks of Wang Fuk Court, residents mobilised themselves even as non-government groups also began activating their networks to offer help.

Some came up with innovative efforts to fill whatever gaps they saw in the disaster relief efforts. Within hours of the blaze, a 30-year-old app designer launched a website, assisted by artificial intelligence, featuring a clear interface that allowed anxious residents to report missing family members and possible locations among the 2,800 flats.

Electric vehicles rushed to the scene, uncoiling extension cords to help displaced residents and relief workers charge their phones. "After I watched the news, I quickly fully charged my car and brought all the cables and plugs from home," one driver said.

Supermarket and grocery chains made quick decisions to send supplies and bedding. A telecommunications company offered free data. Restaurants – not only in Tai Po – delivered hot meals to those on the site. "We will close before 9pm. All cooked food will support Tai Po residents," a small sweet soup store, Desert Hero, in Jordan announced on Facebook at 7:40pm on Wednesday, an hour after the fire further escalated.

NGO service centres and kindergartens nearby opened their doors and converted their venues into temporary shelters. A 24-hour gym welcomed residents to take showers, while animal clinics waived consultation fees for pets affected.

As the deadly inferno continued to rage on the second day, animal groups soon realised that the government did not have a network to connect rescued pets and their owners.

They organised themselves to set up a station under a few giant trees outside Wang Fuk Court, providing medical treatment, offering cages to firefighters and owners, and registering missing pets including cats, dogs and turtles.

Two viral photos on social media, liked by more than 200,000 users, featured a firefighter, nicknamed "Fa Zai", looking exhausted after rescuing nine cats and a dog. He put them in a cage and brought them to the volunteer station.

"I couldn't imagine how their lives could have been without the firefighters and volunteers," an internet user commented. Against the backdrop of the charred blocks, the plaza next to Wang Fuk Court was transformed into a vibrant relief center, manned by hundreds of volunteers. Neatly labelled items – bedding, clothing, food, drinks and pet supplies – overflowed at almost every corner.

"Some volunteers took on the role as the 'person-in-charge' for each type of donated item. They keep track of what we have in Google Sheets and report on what is still needed," said Jay, a core volunteer in her twenties. "Last night, before I took a nap on the street, I mentioned in the WhatsApp group that we needed 50 volunteers for the daytime shift. When I woke up an hour later, more than 50 people said they could help."

At the plaza, dedicated areas were set up for free medical and counselling services and zones to help domestic helpers.

Despite the enthusiasm and the ground-up activity, officials did cast a watchful eye, mindful that those with nefarious motives might infiltrate the groups and cause trouble. A source said national security police were on the lookout for "potential seditious and secessionist activities".

Yesterday morning, some volunteers said they received messages from a government department that they needed to clear out of the area but home affairs minister Alice Mak Mei-kuen said her bureau had not called police to disperse any groups.

The Post has been unable to verify the volunteers' claims. The volunteers said they would find warehouses to store the supplies and planned to give them to different NGOs.

Mak also announced an online donation platform would be launched to coordinate relief efforts as residents began relocating to temporary accommodation.

Volunteer Karri Liu, who was at the scene for three days, told the Post: "I do believe we filled the gap to the urgent needs of the displaced. And it's something far beyond offering supplies. I hope that the authentic, yet sometimes chaotic, relief efforts could show them that Hongkongers are with them in their hour of need."

The government is coordinating with the information technology sector to construct an online platform for people and groups to register donations which will be distributed to affected residents as needed. The Home and Youth Affairs Bureau said the public could register via WhatsApp at 9213 2388 to facilitate government matching donations with required supplies.

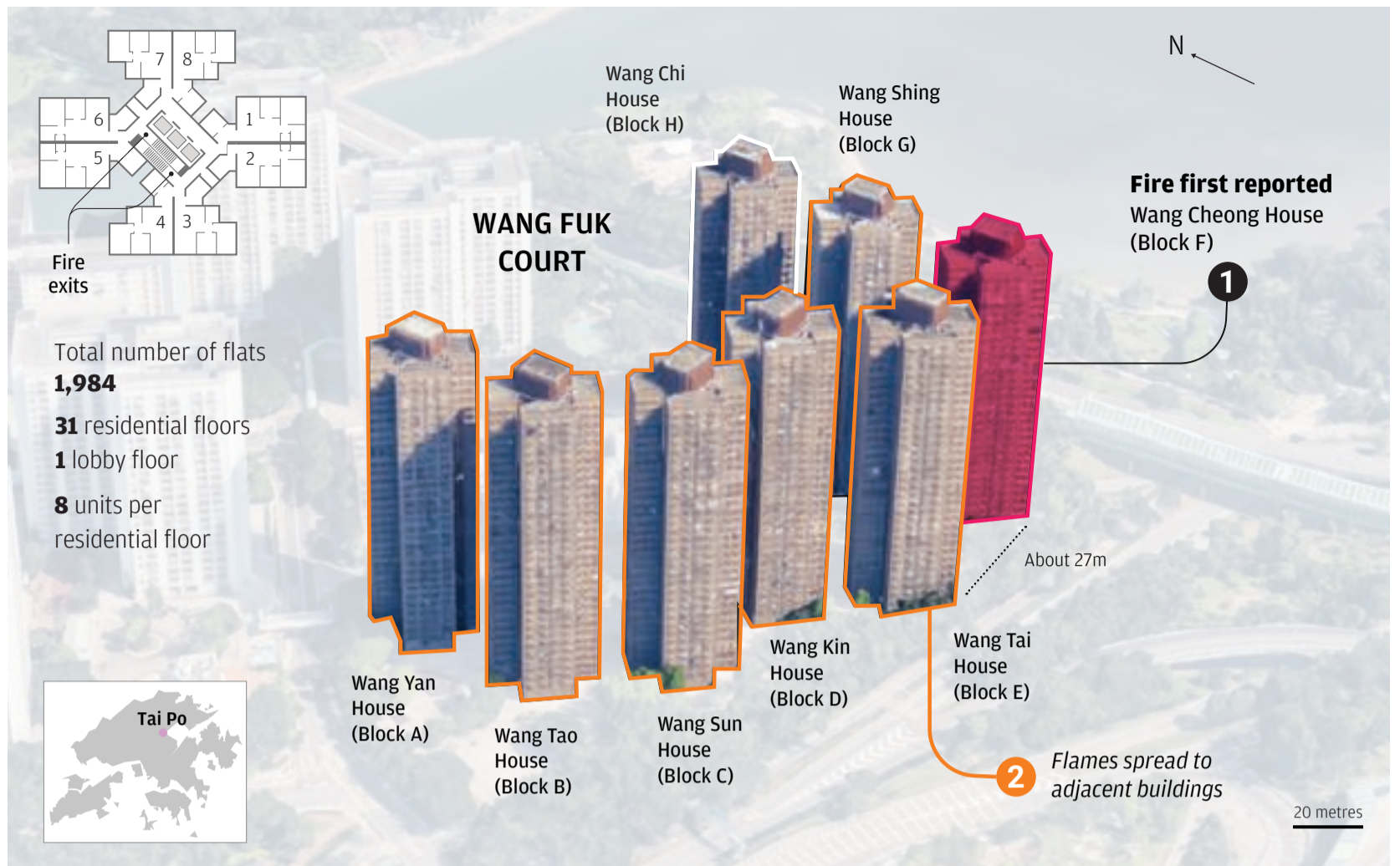


Volunteers sort donated clothes and other supplies at a shelter for affected residents in Tung Cheong Street Sports Centre. Photo: Elson Li

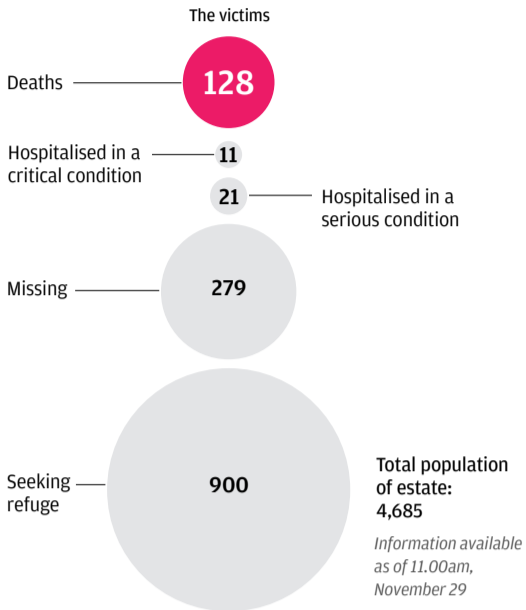
FROM ASHES, STRENGTH

How the Tai Po fire unfolded

The deadly Wang Fuk Court fire is Hong Kong's worst fire in more than seven decades, requiring two days to bring it under control. The blaze ignited on Wednesday afternoon and rapidly engulfed seven of the complex's eight 31-storey towers.



Total number of flats
1,984
31 residential floors
1 lobby floor
8 units per residential floor



Timeline of the inferno

<p>1 Wednesday, November 26 2.51pm Fire first reported at Wang Cheong House. It quickly ignites mesh netting and bamboo scaffolding of the residential tower. It is initially classified as a No 1 alarm fire.</p> <p>2 Around 3.30pm Upgraded to a No 4 alarm fire.</p> <p>Late afternoon Flames and thick smoke spread across at least five adjacent buildings. Over 700 firefighting and medical personnel, along with over 200 vehicles, are dispatched. Hundreds of residents begin evacuation.</p> <p>Around 6.20pm Upgraded to a No 5 alarm, the highest level in Hong Kong, as the inferno rages. High temperatures and falling debris severely challenge firefighting efforts.</p>	<p>Evening Authorities open nearby schools to serve as temporary shelters for approximately 700 to 900 evacuees. The official death toll rises to 13 as hundreds of firefighters and police actively work at the scene. A firefighter is among the dead.</p> <p>Late night President Xi Jinping expresses his condolences and calls for "all-out efforts" to minimise casualties and losses. Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu visits a temporary shelter after chairing an emergency meeting.</p> <p>After midnight The death toll rises to 36, as another 279 people are missing. City leader Lee calls the fire a "catastrophe".</p>	<p>Overnight Three people, including two directors and a consultant of the contractor, are arrested for alleged gross negligence, as about 20 bodies are removed from the scene.</p> <p>Thursday, November 27 Early morning The fire is reported under control in four of the seven affected blocks. Search and rescue teams begin searching lower floors for survivors as 44 people are confirmed dead.</p> <p>Afternoon The death toll hits 55, with dozens injured, as firefighters extinguish blazes at four buildings and contain flames at the remaining three.</p>	<p>Evening The death toll remains at 55 with firefighters rescuing 55 survivors, as fires in all seven blocks are brought under control. City leader Lee announces HK\$300 million will be put into a fund to assist the victims and HK\$10,000 will be distributed to each affected household by that night.</p> <p>By midnight Some 83 people have been found dead, with the injury count remaining at 76.</p> <p>Friday, November 28 Afternoon The death toll rises to 128, with 79 injured. The status of 200 people remains unclear. Some 89 bodies are unidentifiable. Secretary for Security Chris Tang Ping-keung says extinguishing and rescue efforts are mostly finished, while the current priority is to cool the fire zone.</p>	<p>Evening The Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) says it has made eight arrests in its probe into the fire.</p> <p>Saturday, November 29 8am The three-day mourning period begins as city leader Lee, principal government officials, members of the city's top decision-making Executive Council and a group of civil servants observe a three-minute silence at government headquarters.</p> <p>Afternoon China's State Council Safety Committee orders a nationwide "investigation and rectification campaign" to eliminate major fire risks in high-rise buildings.</p>
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SMP Graphic



SCMP mourns the victims of the tragedy in Tai Po and extends its deepest condolences to their families and all loved ones.

Readers wishing to help may consider donating to a HK\$300 million fund the government has set up to assist the victims. They may send their donations to this account: 012 8752 190 1597 (Bank of China).

Readers may also consider helping via the following organisations:

- Hong Kong Red Cross : 2802 0021 | <https://www.redcross.org.hk/en/index.html>
- Hong Kong Sheng Kung Hui Welfare Council : 8209 8122 | <https://skhwc.org.hk/en/>
- Hong Kong Family Welfare Society : 2772 2322 | <https://www.hkfws.org.hk/en/home>
- Po Leung Kuk : 2277 8500 | <https://www.poleungkuk.org.hk/>
- Feeding Hong Kong : 2205 6568 | <https://feedinghk.org/>