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Twelve students killed in bonfire collapse

COLLEGE STATION, Texas - Investigators focused Friday on the 100-foot, spliced-together center pole in the Texas A&M bonfire pyramid as they tried to figure out why the huge stack of logs collapsed with a loud crack, killing 12 young people.

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The last two bodies were pulled from the sprawling timber pile early Friday as grief paralyzed the campus during what is supposed to be one of the most exciting times of the year: the runup to the big football game against the University of Texas.

"We're still trying to understand it," Texas A&M President Ray Bowen said Friday. "We don't have the answers to all the questions. We're still trying to deal with the shock."

Tim Kerlee Jr., a freshman from Germantown, Tenn., died Friday, bringing the death toll to 12. Kerlee had been hospitalized with a crushed pelvis and a broken arm.

The building and lighting of the bonfire is a deeply held, 90-year tradition on this football-mad campus of 43,000 about 90 miles northwest of Houston. Early Thursday, the stack came roaring down in a heap, crushing students who were assembling it.

Bowen on Friday ordered the formation of a task force of engineers and other experts to look into the disaster "so we'll be able to analyze all the facts and make decisions to see this horror never visits our campus again."

Attention turned to the pole that served as the central support for the massive bonfire. The pole was to have been cut so it was about 55 feet high, the same height as the stack of 7,000 logs, each about 10 to 15 feet long. Each log was wired to three others in a formation that resembled a wedding cake.

The center pole actually was two logs, fused together with bolts and wire and driven about 10 feet into the ground. Rusty

Thompson, faculty adviser to the bonfire project, said the splice "would be a focus of the investigation."

Some witnesses said they heard a crack as the structure toppled.

"All of a sudden the center pole snapped, and everything went with it," said Nathan Knowles, a freshman who was on the stack. "It took five seconds, if that much, for the whole thing to come down."

Pieces of the center pole were kept separate from the other logs as the pile was dismantled.

The bonfire lighting, scheduled for Thanksgiving, was canceled for just the second time in history. The first time was in 1963, after President Kennedy's assassination. Whether the tradition will resume was uncertain. The football game is still on for next Friday at Texas A&M.

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Officials have said about 70 people were stacking the logs upright in layers when the pile gave way. Some students were hurled from the structure. Others were trapped in the shifting logs.

In addition to the 12 killed - 11 students and a recent graduate - 27 others were injured. Four remained in critical condition Friday, two of them on life support.

One of the problems in reconstructing the accident is that there is no formal plan for building the structure.

"A blueprint, as such, does not exist," Thompson said. "It's really a handed-down tradition. Students teach the next generation of students what they do."

It was uncertain whether any of the students working on the bonfire had been drinking alcohol. "I'm not really prepared to address that but I don't have any evidence of that," school spokesman Lane Stephenson said.

Clad in overalls, work boots and hard hats, hundreds of students stoically hauled lumber away in the rescue effort - displaying the Aggies' famed "12th Man" spirit in which all are willing to help out anytime they are needed.

"Our spirit is still here, but it metamorphosized," said Rob Clarke, an A&M junior. "It used to be a rowdy, vocal kind. Now it's the solemn and quiet form."

After the last body was removed at 2:05 a.m., almost 24 hours after the collapse, it took crews only 20 more minutes to clear the remaining logs, leaving the site a barren circle of dirt.

At one corner of the site, several people placed bouquets of flowers.

Former President George Bush, on campus to address a forum, visited the scene of the accident and noted, "Time has a way of healing."

Campus gardens and benches were deserted. The click of a cadet's boots could be heard a block away. Still numb, students skipped classes and pored over newspapers, trying to comprehend the tragedy.

"There's not many people in classes," said Brad Isbell, a student in civil engineering. "It's very emotional, real quiet. Nobody is saying much. It's real somber. Even the professors are emotional."

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