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Some World Trade Center victims were 'vaporized'

NEW YORK (AP) — Three months after the World Trade Center attack, victims' families are being forced to face the ghastly possibility that many of the dead were "vaporized," as the medical examiner put it, and may never be identified. So far, fewer than 500 victims have been positively identified out of the roughly 3,000 feared dead. Sixty were identified solely through DNA.

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The city and state have allowed victims' families to obtain death certificates without proof of a body, but many families place great importance on an ID based on actual remains.

"Until you have something tangible, you just keep hoping — maybe there'll be some sort of miracle," said Jeanne Maurer, whose 31-year-old daughter, Jill Campbell, is presumed dead. "You can't accept it until you have something.

"I still say, 'My daughter's missing,'" Maurer said.

Many victims will undoubtedly be identified. Nearly 10,000 body parts have been pulled from the mountains of mangled metal and matchstick-size splinters at ground zero.

But Dr. Charles Hirsch, the chief medical examiner, triggered an angry response two weeks ago when he told grieving relatives that many bodies — no one is sure how many — had been "vaporized" and were beyond identification.

Hirsch declined to be interviewed. But spokeswoman Ellen Borakove said he meant that bodies were consumed by blazing fuel from the two crashed airliners, or "rendered into dust" when the 1,100-foot skyscrapers collapsed, one concrete slab floor onto another.

Dr. Michael Baden, the state's chief forensic pathologist and a top expert in the field, said in September that most bodies should be identifiable because the fires — while hot enough to melt steel — did not reach the 3,200-degree, 30-minute level necessary to incinerate a body.

Borakove said her office agrees with Baden's calculation — as applied to a full body. "But when the planes hit the buildings, the bodies that were in the planes as well as some of the bodies that were in the buildings were fragmented upon impact, and those fragments burn more quickly," she said.

The combination of fire and compression from tons of rubble could reduce a human body to a small amount of tissue and bone, said Dr. Cyril Wecht, a top forensic pathologist in Pittsburgh. And finding such small samples of DNA in 1.2 million tons of rubble spread over 16 acres is a difficult proposition.

"There are pieces," he said. "But how do you identify and extract it from other similarly appearing pieces at the site — bricks, mortar, rubble?"

Marian Fontana, president of the Sept. 11 Widows and Victims' Families Association, said: "My fear is that financial incentives will cause the city to clean up the site quickly, rather than to treat it as a retrieval site and do things in a dignified way."

Her firefighter husband, Dave, is among the missing.

In particular, families are worried that remains will end up at the Staten Island landfill where trade center debris is taken and sorted.

"The remains shouldn't end up in the garbage heap," Maurer said.

Forensic pathologists are trying to match the DNA of tissue taken from ground zero with the DNA of known victims. Victims' families have supplied clothes, hairbrushes and other personal items from which DNA could be lifted for comparison.

Hirsch's task is unprecedented in size. After the Oklahoma City bombing, all 168 people killed were eventually identified. But even after four years, some of the recovered tissue and bone were never linked to any of the victims.

Borakove said recently developed computer software enables more efficient DNA identification.

In the meantime, some families, like the Maurers, are waiting to schedule services.

"We're not ready really for a memorial," said her father, Joseph Maurer. "We'll do a funeral with remains — if we find them."

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