

Ethiopian community mourns 5 dead in Seattle fire?

By Mike Carter, Susan Kelleher, Eric Pryne, Jennifer Sullivan and Keith Ervin
Seattle Times staff reporters



Seattle Fire Department officials say they still don't know what caused Saturday's fatal fire that killed four children and a woman.

Seattle Fire Chief Gregory Dean said the bodies of the five victims were found in a second-floor bathroom. The fire started in a living area on the first floor of the two-story unit and quickly spread to the second floor, Dean said during a news conference Sunday at Fire Department headquarters in Pioneer Square.

Fire crews have completed their investigation into the blaze but the cause remains undetermined, pending additional testing by the state crime laboratory, Dean said. The fire does not appear to be suspicious and "at this point we believe it was a tragic event," he added.

The fire erupted about 10 a.m. Saturday at the apartment at 334 N.W. 41st St., and quickly became an inferno.

The first firefighters to arrive were unable to fight the intense smoke and flames because a mechanical failure on their engine prevented them from pumping water. The attack on the fire was delayed until another truck arrived minutes later.

The fire was the deadliest in Seattle in decades. It started in Helen Gebregiorgis's three-bedroom, two-story apartment, where she, her sister and the children had gathered for a sleepover Friday night after coming home from the movie "Karate Kid."

Dean said Sunday that they still don't know what caused the mechanical failure that prevented the engine from developing enough pressure to pour water on the fire. He said the engine was only about two years old and had been successfully tested earlier that morning.

There is no mechanical override on the engine in case of such a failure, Dean added.

"Currently, what we understand is we had a mechanical problem with that piece of apparatus," he said. "I think the firefighters did everything they were trained to do."

Asked why firefighters didn't try to enter the burning unit to try to rescue the victims, Dean said the Fire Department bars firefighters from entering burning buildings until water is being poured on a blaze.

"Having flames and fire on the first floor they cannot proceed onto the second floor until they have got that fire out," Dean said. "If you don't put that fire out you will have that fire follow you and burn you and your hose and remove your escape route also."

Helen Gebregiorgis, who lost her sons, Joseph Gebregiorgis, 13, and Yaseen Shamam, 5, and her daughter Nisreen Shamam, 6, has helped investigators piece together the critical moments after the fire broke out. Also killed in the blaze was Gebregiorgis's 22-year-old sister, Eyerusalem Gebregiorgis, and her 7-year-old niece, Nyella Smith, according to her brother, Daniel Gebregiorgis.

After the fire erupted, Helen Gebregiorgis ran upstairs to alert her sister and the children about the fire, Dean said. The fire alarm inside the apartment also was sounding, Dean said.

"She grabbed one of the kids, came downstairs. She believed the rest were following her when she got outside she realized they had not," Dean said.

Hundreds of Ethiopians gathered at a community center in Seattle Saturday night to mourn the victims of the fire. The overflow crowd spilled out onto East Yesler Way in the Central Area as the mother of three of the dead children wailed and paced the sidewalk, accompanied by eight to 10 other women who were there to mourn and comfort her. "I just want my babies," Helen Gebregiorgis said. Daniel Gebregiorgis said "I've got to stay strong for everyone else." One firefighter suffered minor injuries when he jumped from another truck to move a length of hose that had fallen onto the Fremont Bridge as the rig was racing to the fire, said Helen Fitzpatrick, Seattle Fire Department spokeswoman. Debbie Tesfamariam said she and her daughter had been friends with Gebregiorgis for more than 10 years. "They were good, good people. My heart just bleeds for them. So many lives," Tesfamariam said. "Nobody knows what happened. Nobody can believe they're all gone." On Sunday, a makeshift memorial of flowers and notes was growing outside the apartment complex. "Every moment counts" Dean said that even if the first arriving engine had not experience a mechanical failure firefighters would have still spent a good deal of time battling the first-floor fire before heading upstairs to try to rescue the family trapped upstairs. He declined to speculate whether the mechanical failure may have contributed to the loss of life. "People will make assumptions. I think what we know is we had a problem with our apparatus," Dean said. "There was heavy smoke and fire damage going on." Still, there was a delay of about 2 1/2 minutes in attacking the blaze, records show. Dean said records show the engines were dispatched at 10:04 a.m. Engine 18 arrived at 10:09 a.m., the second truck about two minutes later, and the third at 10:12 a.m. "Our firefighters believe they can save everybody, so they're beating themselves up right now trying to figure out what happened," he said. Engine 18, arriving from a station at 1521 N.W. Market St., was the truck that had the mechanical failure, preventing it from pumping water. The engine was sent to the city's maintenance shop where crews there will try and determine what went wrong. The engine could potentially be sent back to the manufacturer, Dean said on Sunday.

"My babies are inside"

Witnesses reported seeing Helen Gebregiorgis run out of the building Saturday morning and into the parking lot. "She said, 'My babies, my babies, my babies are inside!'" said Lisa May, of Bellevue, who stayed in another of the building's five units Friday night to attend Saturday's University of Washington graduation. May tried to get to the apartment, she said, but was driven back by the smoke. She and another witness comforted Gebregiorgis until she was taken to Harborview Medical Center, where she was evaluated and released. She "was just screaming and flailing around," May said. Neighbour Nikos Antonopoulos said he heard screaming and saw smoke coming from a window in the front of the building, and then smoke and flames from the back. He grabbed a garden hose and squirted water through a window until firefighters arrived. "After the Fire Department came, they did a good job and put the fire out very fast," Antonopoulos said. Alleci Clemons, 40, who lives next door to the apartment, said the fire spread so fast that no one could get out. Mayor Mike McGinn visited the scene Saturday afternoon, as did City Councilmember Tim Burgess. "It's quite devastating," said Burgess, who chairs the council's Public Safety and Education Committee. Investigators from the Seattle police and the bomb-and-arson squad were on the scene. Their response is routine for fatal fires, said Fitzpatrick. The apartment is owned by the Seattle Housing Authority. Virginia Felton, spokeswoman for the agency, said the apartments are inspected every year or every other year for fire hazards and safety issues. In this case, the smoke alarm in the building did go off, she said. There had been a fire in that unit in 2008 — it was caused by a candle — but a different family lived in the apartment at the time, she said. The housing authority expects to find another apartment for Helen Gebregiorgis and her family. She and her extended family came from Ethiopia in 1989, according to her brother. A community grieves On Saturday night, members of the Tigray Community Association at 19th Avenue and East Yesler Way turned out to support the

family. Tigray is a region in northern Ethiopia.

More than 50 women, almost all in white robes, sat in a downstairs room, listening to a priest holding a Bible. Among them was the grandmother of the four dead children.

Community elders, mostly men, sat around a conference table in an upstairs room.

"This is one of the hardest times for our community," said Berhane Abraha, a spokesman for the community.

"The shock, to observe, it's getting intolerable for us to move on," another man told McGinn, who with several aides arrived around 7:15 p.m.

The leaders asked McGinn to help them find a larger building in which the Ethiopian community can gather to mourn. In the meantime, they asked for leniency in ticketing parked cars around the association headquarters. They also asked for counseling help. "Obviously we have a lot of difficult tasks ahead of us," Abraha said. "This is too big a disaster for a small community like ours to deal with."

One man said he had heard criticism of the Fire Department's response to the blaze, and asked McGinn to look into it. McGinn said he would, and promised the Ethiopian community the city's support.

"It would be better to be here in a time of happiness," McGinn told the leaders. "We share your sorrow."

Seattle Times staff reporters Jack Broom and Emily Heffter and news researcher Gene Balk contributed to this report.