

Exits Were Locked at Argentine Club Where a Fire Killed 175

Survivors say the crowd of 4,000 struggled to get out as smoke filled the disco; 714 were injured.

From Associated Press

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BUENOS AIRES — Emergency exits at a nightclub packed with teenagers were padlocked or wired shut when a flare ignited the foam ceiling, starting a blaze that killed 175 people and injured more than 700 in one of Argentina's worst disasters, survivors and officials said Friday.

The 4,000 fans at the Thursday night concert struggled to reach the exits as burning debris fell on them. But they found at least four escape routes locked in an apparent effort to prevent people from entering the club without paying, Buenos Aires Mayor Anibal Ibarra said.

"Had they been open, we surely would have avoided a lot of deaths," Ibarra said, calling the locking of the doors at the Republica de la Cromagnon disco an "irresponsible act."

The concert crowd for the band Los Callejeros was nearly three times the venue's capacity of 1,500 people, Argentine media reported. The club's owner, Omar Chaban, was detained Friday for questioning.

Investigators believe that the fire was caused by a flare set off during the concert by a fan. People attending rock concerts in Argentina frequently light flares and fireworks. Survivors said band members appealed to fans at one point during the show to refrain from lighting fireworks.

At least 714 people were injured, officials said, and more than 100 were in critical condition, said Julio Salinas, an official with the Buenos Aires emergency services department.

The fire tore through the nightclub in the working-class neighborhood of Once, filling the room with thick smoke.

"Someone from the crowd tossed a flare, and there were immediately flames," 22-year-old Fabian Zamudeo said. "Parts of the roof started falling down in flames and people started running, knocking over the speakers and light stands. People were choking on smoke, and I tried to push as many people out as I could."

Witnesses described chaotic scenes of people rushing for the doors, their vision blurred by thick smoke that obscured emergency lighting.

A 22-year-old who gave his name only as Andres said surging crowds pushed their way toward the club's six exits but couldn't open some of them.

"Once the fire erupted, everyone ran for the doors, but there was only one very narrow one open at the exit closest to us," he said. "Another wider door next to it was locked."

Other witnesses told of people struggling to force open doors.

Many of the victims died of smoke inhalation, officials said.

"It seems they were condemned to a terrible trap," Interior Minister Anibal Fernandez said.