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**Coordination and Equipment Faulted in Fatal Chicago Fire**

**By JO NAPOLITANO**

CHICAGO, July 7 - An independent commission that investigated a fatal high-rise fire that broke out last October said Wednesday that a lack of coordination among firefighters and a lack of sprinklers contributed to the deaths of six people.

In a sharply critical report, the commission recommended an overhaul of Fire Department procedures, citing muddled communication during the blaze, failure to direct victims to a safe stairwell and failure to take over the public address system.

The commission, appointed by Cook County officials, also called for significant changes in the city's building code, including mandatory sprinklers in high-rise buildings and doors that can be opened in an emergency. The report was released nine months after the victims died of smoke inhalation when they were locked in a stairwell at an office building in the Loop.

The commission found that the firefighters put too much emphasis on fighting the fire and too little on finding the victims. The report said they failed to do a top-to-bottom search of the stairwell of the 35-story building and did not find the bodies until the blaze was extinguished.

In addition to procedural shortcomings, there was a more endemic problem within the Fire Department, the commission found: some firefighters were unfit for duty.

"We have examples of an almost 300-pound fireman trying to get up the stairs and he ran out of gas, understandably," Abner J. Mikva, a law professor and former judge who led the investigation, said in a phone interview. "He was ordered to go search for people who were trapped and couldn't complete the mission. He ran out of air but was also clearly not physically fit for that kind of assignment."

Cortez Trotter, fire commissioner since April, defended the department in a televised news conference on Wednesday afternoon, although he would not address specific elements of the report because he said he had not yet read it in its entirety.

"While we may not ultimately agree with every conclusion and every recommendation that was reached, I am sure on whole that the document will provide positive inputs," Commissioner Trotter said, adding that the department was putting together its own group to review the report and make changes.

The commission also disagreed with the Fire Department's finding of arson. The commission, which listened to the public testimony of 48 people, conducted an additional 60 interviews and

studied thousands of pages of evidence, found the cause of the fire "undetermined."

In addition to its critique of the Fire Department, the report criticized the building's management company for failing to direct firefighters to a written fire plan in its lobby, for neglecting to unlock its stairwell doors and for ordering a complete evacuation of the building. The commission said a partial evacuation, reducing the number of tenants in the stairwells, could have prevented some deaths.