

Death toll hits 106 in Hawaii wildfires

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Honolulu, August 16 (RHC)-- A week after wildfires ravaged Hawaii's resort town of Lahaina, search and rescue efforts on Maui island continue, with officials saying that the death toll has risen to 106.

"Currently, we have identified three individuals who are pending next of kin notification. At the time of this release, there have been 106 human remains recovered, awaiting identification," the office of Maui County said in a statement on Tuesday. "We offer our deepest condolences to the families who are

beginning to receive notifications about their loved ones,” Mayor Richard Bissen was quoted as saying in the statement.

State Governor Josh Green warned on Tuesday that the death toll from last week’s inferno on the island of Maui – already the deadliest US wildfire in more than a century – would grow significantly, urging Hawaiians to gird for a number that could be two or three times its present level.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services deployed a team of coroners, pathologists and technicians along with exam tables, X-ray units and other equipment to identify victims and process remains. Officials said they had collected DNA samples from 41 people whose relatives were missing. The island’s police chief has said many of the bodies are so badly charred that they are unrecognisable, such was the ferocity of the blaze.

“It’s going to be a very, very difficult mission,” Greene said. “And patience will be incredibly important because of the number of victims.” The county said in a statement that Robert Dyckman, 74, and Buddy Jantoc, 79 were among the dead, the first people to be named. A further three victims have been identified, the county wrote, and their names will be released once they are identified.

Residents desperate to get back to check on the homes they fled have expressed frustration at bans that have prevented people from getting into the town of Lahaina. Officials warned of the dangers of unstable buildings and potential airborne toxic chemicals in the area and said on Monday that one arrest for trespassing had been made.

More than 2,200 buildings were damaged or destroyed by fire, with a total of more than 3,000 buildings damaged by fire or smoke or both.

A police placard system that was supposed to let people back into Lahaina descended into chaos on Monday, when it was suspended an hour after starting. Green, the state governor, warned against any attempt at a land grab in the town’s devastated remains, as locals fear that deep-pocketed developers might take advantage of people’s desperation and try to buy up plots that can be turned into luxury housing or more lucrative short-term rentals.

“Our goal is to have a local commitment – forever – to this community, as we rebuild,” he said. “So we will be making sure that we do all that we can to prevent that land from falling into the hands of people from the outside.”

The exact cause of the blazes is being investigated and questions are being asked about authorities’ preparedness and response to the catastrophe. Some fire hydrants ran dry in the early stages of the wildfire, and multiple warning systems either failed or were not activated.

A class-action lawsuit has been filed against Hawaiian Electric, the state’s biggest power firm, claiming the company should have shut off its power lines to lower the risk of fire.

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