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55 flee as fire rages in guesthouse

By Karl Ho

TWELVE people were taken to hospital yesterday when a blaze whipped through an 11th-floor guesthouse in Tsim Sha Tsui.

Eight of the victims were admitted to hospital in fair condition while the rest were discharged after treatment. Most were overcome by heavy smoke.

The fire started about 11 am in the Baccarat Hotel in Windsor Mansion at 29 Chatham Road and was soon upgraded to third alarm.

It came only weeks after a fatal fire in nearby Mirador Mansion.

Eight breathing apparatus teams and seven jets fought the flames while a fire ladder rescued guesthouse residents.

Fifty-five people, mostly lodgers, were led to safety. Of the 12 sent to Queen Elizabeth Hospital, one was an 83-year-old woman admitted in fair condition.

Residents on other floors were led down to safety before the fire was put out about 1.12 pm.

Fire Service Department Divisional Commander (Kowloon South) Mr Au Bit-leung said the fire was believed to have started in the guesthouse on the 11th floor.

He said room partitions and rubbish blocking the stairway had made fighting the fire tougher.

A probe into the fire and an allegedly faulty alarm system would be held by the department, he said.

A guesthouse lodger, Mr Henry Nass said the sound of a circuit short was heard about 11 am when the fire started and then he saw smoke drifting into his room.

"The smoke clouded in as I opened the door ... I ran down the stairway for my life and tried the fire alarms on two floors but they didn't work at all," the New York businessman said.

"All I managed to save were some business documents."

A guesthouse maid Ms Lok Wai-chu, 65, said she felt the fire might have started in room 12.

"I was working when a noise came from room 12, which was next to the kitchen. Thick smoke soon developed after the noise, filling every corner of the place," she said while being treated in an ambulance.

The smoke alarmed another lodger, Mr Mariano Meneses, who was taking a shower.

"I wouldn't have known anything had happened had not the smoke seeped in to alarm me of the fire," said the Filipino tourist. He used a towel to breathe through in his escape.

Residents from other floors also complained of the alarm's failure.

"I didn't hear any fire alarm at all, but it did sound once four years ago," said an eighth-floor resident, Mrs Chan Chan Mei-yuen.

And 79-year-old Mrs Ruth Gundersen was overjoyed with her narrow escape.

"A brave and big-hearted young man carried me on his back to bring me down from the smoke-filled apartment on the

eighth floor. I want to thank him but he soon disappeared."

Asked about the failure of the alarm, the owners' corporation chairman, identifying himself only as Mr Chu, said maintenance work had been done on the fire prevention installation.

"I have no idea on the reason for the failure, but we will probe the problem as soon as possible," he said.

Injured in the fire were: Mr Kouit Paraksa Chuen, 27, Thai (fair); Ms Diamo Corlyom, 20, British (fair); Ms Carole Gray, 25, British (fair); Ms Viva Williams, 83, British (fair); Ms Lok Wai-chu, 65, Chinese (fair); Ms Yiu Tsui-fung, 29, Chinese (fair); Ms Cheung Lam-po, 65, Chinese (fair); Mr Kung Manshui, 70, Chinese (fair); Ms Rita Camacho, 33, Saipanese (discharged); Mr Paul Mirabella, 24, Canadian (discharged); Mrs Susan Mirabella, 29, Canadian (discharged); Mr R G Wood, 49, American (discharged).