

'Very worried' Hong Kong fire survivors hunt for the missing

AFP, Hong Kong

The morning after saving her elderly neighbour from Hong Kong's deadliest fire in decades, retiree Kwok was trawling through social media groups looking for signs other missing residents were safe yesterday.

The day before, as roaring flames edged closer, the 69-year-old had run through her apartment block looking for her neighbour, who she knew lived alone and used a wheelchair.

She got her outside before the inferno engulfed their residential estate, killing at least 44 people and leaving hundreds missing.

Yesterday, Kwok and others in her community were mobilising to track down the hundreds authorities said were still missing, creating WhatsApp groups and an app to try to locate those unaccounted for.

"I saw (the flames) draw closer, it was burning red and my heart was burning too," said Kwok, describing how she had rushed through the building knocking on doors to warn people. She said she had not heard a fire alarm at



Smoke rises from the site of an Israeli airstrike on the southern Lebanese village of El Mahmoudiyeh yesterday. Israel has repeatedly bombed Lebanon despite a year-old ceasefire with Hezbollah, saying it targets the group's members and infrastructure to prevent rearmament.

PHOTO: AFP



any point during the ordeal.

As the sun rose over the smouldering towers of Wang Fuk Court yesterday, displaced residents had already spontaneously begun organising themselves to deal with the aftermath.

Hundreds in the neighbourhood sprang into action overnight, forming a decentralised but energetic community of helpers. "There are at least three (people) we can't reach, we are very worried for them, and I'm going to the community centre later to continue searching," Kwok said.

After what many said had been a sleepless night, crowds gathered on parks and walkways in the northern district of Tai Po to bear witness to the still-flickering remains of the estate.

Russia to halt war if Ukraine withdraws: Putin

AFP, Bishkek

Russian President Vladimir Putin said yesterday that Moscow would end its Ukraine offensive if Kyiv withdrew from territory Moscow claims at its own - otherwise they would take it by force.

The Russian army has been slowly but steadily grinding through eastern Ukraine in costly battles against outnumbered and outgunned Ukrainian forces.

Washington has meanwhile renewed its push to end the nearly

four-year war, putting forward a surprise plan that it hopes to finalise through upcoming talks with Moscow and Kyiv.

"If Ukrainian forces leave the territories they hold, then we will stop combat operations," Putin said during a visit to Kyrgyzstan. "If they don't, then we will achieve it by military means." Russia controls one-fifth of Ukraine's territory.

The issue of occupied land, which Kyiv has said it will never cede, has become the key stumbling block in the peace process.

Putin repeated the claim that Russia had encircled the Ukrainian army in Pokrovsk and Myrnohrad in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region.

"Krasnoarmeysk and Dimitrov are completely surrounded," he said, using the Russian names for the cities. Moscow was also advancing in Vovchansk and Siversk, as well as approaching the important logistic hub of Guliaipole, he added. The Russian offensive "is practically impossible to hold back, so there is little that can be done about it", Putin said.

Last path to safety shuts

Say Afghans as US halts visas after Washington DC shooting

REUTERS, Kabul

Afghans who fled the Taliban and have waited years for a US resettlement decision say their last path to safety has shut since Washington froze all Afghan immigration cases following a shooting near the White House.

The US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) said late on Wednesday it had halted processing for Afghan nationals indefinitely, hours after an Afghan man shot and critically wounded two National Guard soldiers in Washington.

President Donald Trump called the attack "an act of terror" and



ordered a review of Afghans who entered the country during Joe Biden's presidency.

For Afghans sheltering in Pakistan, tens of thousands of whom are awaiting US resettlement decisions, the announcement felt like their last safe route had closed.

"I was deeply distressed when I

heard this news. We have completed all the required review procedures," said Ahmad Samim Naimi, 34, from Afghanistan's Panjshir province, who had worked as a TV presenter and press adviser under the previous, US-backed government.

He fled to Pakistan after the Taliban began detaining journalists and former government workers, and had applied for resettlement in the United States. "If I go back, one day you will certainly hear news of either my arrest or my death," he said.

Remaining in Pakistan has become increasingly difficult as the authorities have launched a crackdown on Afghans without formal refugee status.

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