

Plans to have Mercy Hospital up and running again

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St Joseph Mercy Hospital's main structure was yesterday devastated by an early morning fire of unknown origin, but plans are in train to have it up and running again and its board will meet shortly on this issue.



Shahan Rahim

The hospital, one of the country's leading healthcare institutions, stood as a long-serving Roman Catholic institution and an enduring historical structure. The blaze temporarily brought the Kingston area, where the hospital is located, to a standstill. Patients and employees alike scrambled to safety from the burning building. "Me great uncle in the hospital and I don't know if he safe! Oh lord, please help that he come out safe," a woman said, as she ran through Parade Street. She was among persons on their way to visit relatives who were in-patients. The police quickly established a heavy presence at the scene, setting up barriers and keeping the swelling crowd that converged at bay.

Reports estimate that the fire started just before 7 am and it took close to two hours before it was brought under control. Fire fighters were still soaking the demolished wooden structure yesterday afternoon, hours after the flames were doused. Police said last evening that the origin of the fire was still unknown but investigations were ongoing.

President Bharrat Jagdeo toured the burnt out site late yesterday afternoon and he said the administration will assist Mercy Hospital in the short term and long term. He said initial assessments on the fire are not yet in but stressed that the important thing was that patients were shepherded to safety. Prime Minister Samuel Hinds and Mayor Hamilton Green also visited the fire scene early yesterday morning and the mayor noted the loss of the historical building.

'It was terrible'



Fire rages at the hospital yesterday.

Shahan Rahim, who many staffers credited for saving their lives because of his early detection of the smoke in the building, told Stabroek News he saw the smoke at around 7 am. On observing the smoke, he alerted staff to the impending danger and began assisting in the evacuation. "I told them everyone has to come out of the building and I even opened my car and offer to put some of the patients in there," he explained said. "It was terrible, because two just-born babies had to go in

the car and everyone was screaming and the fire was getting bigger,” a still shaken Rahim added. He said eventually, as the heat intensified, people were forced to retreat. Some paused to weep and tears flowed openly as the hospital building was engulfed.

Stabroek News arrived at the scene around 7 am and the inferno was raging; thick grey clouds of smoke were seen from the central portion of the hospital, which was built in 1945. In a matter of minutes, the wooden structure was engulfed. Patients, including some still hooked up to saline bags, as well as hospital staff were hurried, wheeled and in some instances fetched out of harm’s way. They were initially taken to the Police Sport’s Club Ground and later to the Guyana Red Cross Society building nearby.



Roman Catholic Bishop Francis Alleyne speaking with senior officials and other staff of St Joseph Mercy Hospital at the Red Cross building yesterday.

The fire service had a negligible presence on the scene initially. At most, there were only two hoses trained on the front part of the structure in the crucial 20 minutes after the blaze erupted. Police from the nearby Eve Leary Headquarters quickly set up barricades and kept the rapidly gathering crowd at a distance.

Fire Chief Marlon Gentle told reporters that the exact source of the fire was not yet known but several theories were being explored. “It’s very open,” he said.

Gentle said they received a call at 6.59 am and three units responded; two from the central station and one from Alberttown. “When they got here, they reported that the entire top floor was fully engulfed,” he said. He added that other tenders responded with two large water tanks. He said the aim was to contain the blaze and he noted that water was easily accessible. There were reports yesterday that the fire may have been electrical in origin and may have started in a doctor’s office in the main building. Among the buildings reportedly spared were the operating theatre and the entire western wing, which includes the pharmacy, the dormitory and the canteen, among other facilities.



The hospital building after the flames subsided.

Home Affairs Minister Clement Rohee said he was impressed with the level of coordination between the hospital staff and those assisting from other health institutions. He said staff, including doctors, were at the scene giving full support to the rescue efforts. He noted that other private institutions were also helping. Rohee also spoke on the historical value of Mercy Hospital, calling the hospital a landmark building. He said the tragedy saddened the nation.

Most of the 32 in-patients were taken to the Woodlands and Davis Memorial hospitals while a few were also transferred to the Georgetown Public Hospital (GPH). Minister of Health Dr Leslie Ramsammy said that while the fire will have a severe impact on the health sector because of the hospital's vital role in the delivery of health care, the ministry and the GPH will offer all the support needed to ensure it rejoins the health sector. He revealed that Director of Health Services at the GPH Dr Madan Rambarran and the hospital's Chief Executive Officer Michael Khan, along with other key personnel, have been instructed to assist Mercy Hospital in all areas. Importantly, the GPH is on standby to offer the hospital any medical supply needed. Ramsammy said he did not see Mercy Hospital as a private institution but rather as part of the health sector and as such no resources would be spared in assisting it.

'Immediate needs'

Chief Executive Officer of Mercy Hospital Helen Browman offered no comment to the media, but a statement was subsequently issued by the Guyana Red Cross Society on behalf of the hospital late yesterday afternoon. It confirmed that the fire destroyed the oldest wing of the institution. "All patients were safely evacuated. The destruction of the original hospital building is significant. Presently, the hospital's governing board, doctors, administration, staff and Sisters of Mercy are dealing with the most immediate needs of patients, their families and employees," the release said. It announced that from 9 am today, the hospital's outpatient services will be available at the Red Cross Building. Persons are asked to contact the hospital's published phone numbers for more information.

Hours after members of the fire service managed to put the fires out, anxious hospital employees still stood around in an effort to get a glimpse of the charred remains of the burnt out section. The employees were told to go home and assemble this morning at the Red Cross building, but many of them braved the rain and remained beyond the police barriers. At a meeting held with Browman and other senior personnel at the Red Cross building after the fire was under control, staff members were told that their jobs were still secure. "The union turned up but we told them there is no need for the union because we not firing anyone," the staff was told by a senior staffer. The staff prayed together and they praised members of the Guyana Police Force and members of the Guyana Fire Service.

But while the administration assured the workers of their jobs, many worried whether the hospital would be able to afford to pay them a salary at the end of the month. And those who worked directly in the destroyed building wondered if they may indeed have to look for another job, since it is highly unlikely the hospital can find immediate work for them. Some are expected to return to work today.

Meanwhile, Head of the Roman Catholic Church in Guyana Bishop Francis Alleyne said the lost section of the building is a great piece of history that is no more. The Bishop said he got the news of the fire while sitting at Hosoro, Region One, awaiting a flight to Georgetown. He said he saw the fire from the air and journeyed straight to the hospital upon his arrival at Ogle. He said it was difficult to say what plans are in train to rebuild but added that the idea is to have the hospital up and running and the board of directors will be meeting shortly to discuss it.

‘Services’

Mercy Hospital offered a variety of vital services that no other hospital offered, including MRI, CT scan, massage therapy, pastoral care services and physiotherapy. Writing on her blog on the hospital’s website, CEO Browman in her last post on April 14, said that the hospital saw a record 99 surgeries in March month. At that time, she said the administration was working on a number of projects. “These include the upgrade of the ICU to a four bed unit, an area dedicated for the paediatricians to put their patients, procurement of instruments for the urologist, pilot project on the north wing of distributing stocks in an efficient manner and looking at housing of all the resident care patients in one area so that they can receive further specialised care.”

According to its website, the St Joseph Mercy Hospital had its beginnings when a group of Catholic laymen of the “Sword of the Spirit” movement saw the need for another hospital in Georgetown. The Sword of the Spirit was an association of lay people pledged to the love and service of others with no exception. The idea of a Catholic hospital was not a new one and over the years was being considered by different people, but for one reason or the other, had to be put aside. It was at a group discussion of the “Sword of the Spirit” that the idea of a Catholic hospital was once again considered and a challenging decision was taken to build a Catholic hospital. “They envisioned that this hospital would have as its philosophy, the commitment to serve the community by making available competent health care to those who sought it, irrespective of race, colour or creed, mindful of the teachings of Jesus Christ, Gospel values and the spiritual/physical nature of humankind endeavours. The dignity and individuality of every person was to be honoured by rendering this care in a compassionate and Christian manner.” The hospital said a majority of employees in the nursing service are graduates of the hospital’s School of Nursing.