

Residents return to **ravaged homes** months after Hong Kong fire

● The city's deadliest fire in decades killed 168 people when it ripped through seven of the eight apartment blocks at the Wang Fuk Court complex in November.

● For the first time since then, around 6,000 residents are being given three-hour windows to enter their homes

● Officials have advised residents to prepare mentally, and required them to wear face masks

AFP | Hong Kong, China

Hong Kong residents who lost their homes in a massive fire at an apartment complex last year began returning on Monday for the first time to collect what is left of their belongings.

The city's deadliest fire in decades killed 168 people when it ripped through seven of the eight apartment blocks at the Wang Fuk Court complex in November.

For the first time since then, around 6,000 residents are being given three-hour windows to enter their homes from Monday and get their belongings.

Around 1,400 of them over the age of 65 are expected to visit the buildings.

Officials have advised residents to prepare mentally, and required them to wear face masks, hard hats and gloves before entering their apartments. Steven Chong, 50, who retrieved a computer uploaded with family photos from his flat, told reporters he had used the time to bid farewell to his cat, who died in the fire.

"I don't know where he died,



The aftermath of a fire, which killed 168, inside an apartment block at the Wang Fuk Court residential estate in Hong Kong.



Hong Kong officials have offered to buy the apartments back around the pre-fire market price, but said that rebuilding the complex on the same site was "not feasible"

but I went to the spot where he usually liked to sleep and told him to reincarnate soon," Chong said.

"It was strange, there were many things that I stopped noticing while living there, going back now, it was like, oh so that's how I had decorated it, I

forgot," he added.

Another resident, who did not give his name for privacy reasons, said his whole house had burned down after the fire entered through an open window. "There is nothing to go back to," he said, after visiting his flat. "We hung around to take a look, commemorated it, and left."

More than 920 homes were damaged and some completely destroyed by the blaze, according to the fire department.

Images released by government officials show the ceilings and walls of some flats have collapsed or been charred black, and the interiors littered with debris.

Damaged areas of the residential complex in Hong Kong's Tai Po district have been cordoned off as "danger zones", while reinforcement works have been carried out where the building structure was compromised.

"I don't really have any mental preparation, I just tell myself...



Steven Chong, a resident of Wang Fuk Court estate, shows the media items that he retrieved from his fire damaged apartment in Hong Kong

let the past stay in the past," Tam Tung-ling, who plans to return to her flat at a later date, said outside the complex on Monday.

With 1,700 flats to pick through, authorities hope the belongings retrieval process will be completed by early May.

'Wouldn't want to leave'

Survivor Harry Leung, one of the last residents to leave the complex on the day of the blaze, told AFP that he had mixed emotions about his return.



A view of the towers of Wang Fuk Court residential estate in Hong Kong

that belongs to me, but I have to be so humble, like I'm begging," he said.

"Don't I have the right to stay in my home and pack up my things?"

Betty Ho, who plans to return in May to the flat she lived in for more than 30 years, told AFP that what she wants most to retrieve are the photo albums of her childhood.

Her family's "entire life's possessions are inside that building", Ho said.

After the fire -- the world's deadliest residential building blaze since 1980 -- Ho relocated to temporary housing set up for Wang Fuk Court residents near the estate.

For now, she is allowed to stay there until the end of the year, but she told AFP she felt anxious and powerless when faced with the uncertainty of her future accommodation.

"Will we be evicted?" she asked. "Where will I find somewhere to live?"

While keen to see the flat where he had spent most of his life, the three-hour slot, Leung said, was not enough time.

"I believe there are actually quite a few people who don't want to accept (the government's offer), but have no other options. They've been forced to accept it," Leung told AFP.

"If I had a choice, I really wouldn't want to leave (Wang Fuk Court)," he said.

Former resident Vincent Lee also said the slot is too short. "I'm just going back to a place

'No reason' for US intervention in Cuba: Germany's Merz

AFP | Hanover, Germany

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz said yesterday there was no evident justification for the United States to attack Cuba, following months of mounting pressure from President Donald Trump on the communist-ruled island.

"Despite all the domestic political problems that this country has with its communist regime, there is no discernible threat emanating from Cuba towards other countries," Merz said.

Cuba has been bracing for a possible attack following repeated warnings from Trump that Cuba is "next" after he toppled Venezuela's leader Nicolas Maduro and went to war against Iran.

Speaking at a news conference beside Brazilian President



Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva (L) and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz attend a joint press conference

Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, Merz said the US should settle its differences with Cuba "peacefully and through diplomatic means and not needlessly start a new conflict in the world which will only cause more problems".

"The ability to defend oneself does not mean the right to intervene militarily in other states when their political systems do not match what others might have in mind," he said.

UAE says dismantled Iran-linked group plotting 'terror' operations

● The group had collected funds and transferred them to "suspicious foreign entities"

● They had tried to recruit and indoctrinate people during secret meetings

AFP | Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Authorities in the United Arab Emirates said yesterday they arrested members of an Iran-linked group plotting "terrorist" acts in the country, attempting to recruit Emiratis and funnelling funds to "suspicious" foreign entities.

"The State Security Department announced the dismantling of a terrorist organisation and the arrest of its members," it said, adding they were "planning systematic terrorist and sabotage operations" in the UAE.

"Investigations revealed the organisation's ties to the Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist) in Iran," it added in a statement published on X.

State security also shared mugshots of 27 men and their names, without specifying their nationality.

Group members were handed charges including "establishing and operating a secret organisation, running it from the UAE, pledging allegiance to foreign entities, and harming national unity and social peace," it said.

The group had collected funds and transferred them to "suspicious foreign entities".

They had tried to recruit and indoctrinate people during secret meetings that aimed to "infiltrate sensitive positions", it said.

The group also aimed to "spread misleading ideas among Emirati youth and recruit them to serve foreign interests, incite against the state's foreign policy and internal procedures, and attempt to portray the country negatively," state security said.

27

State security also shared mugshots of 27 men and their names, without specifying their nationality.