

# News

# Rescue drama after

BY KATE CHAMBRÉ

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SIX construction workers escaped death yesterday morning after part of a building they were working on collapsed in Belfast city centre.

The accident occurred at around 10.40am at a Victoria Street construction site where a new office block is being built for the Northern Ireland Law Society.

The men were pouring concrete onto second-floor decking when it gave way and they plunged an estimated 30 feet.

The workers, subcontracted to Turkington Construction in Belfast, are understood to have suffered broken bones in the accident and were taken to the Royal Victoria Hospital for treatment.

Two of the six construction workers were later discharged from hospital.

A spokesman for Belfast Health Trust said yesterday that their four co-workers however remained in hospital – all were in a stable but not life-threatening condition.

It is understood that the two most seriously injured workers are Polish.

Nine fire engines and a specialist fire crew, as well as ambulance crews and police officers attended the scene – once the home of the Northern Bank – close to the rear of the Royal Courts of Justice.

At around midday yesterday three sniffer dogs were taken onto the site to ensure that no-one was trapped beneath the rubble.

Over an hour-and-a-half later the black Labradors emerged with their handlers appearing to have found nothing.

Up to 60 workmen were thought to have been on-site at the time of the accident.

One workman from Donegal, who asked not to be identified, described what happened to the News Letter. "Around five or six men were in the process of pouring concrete onto the second storey of the decking. They were about nine metres off the ground at the time then the whole thing just collapsed."

His friend, who was also working on the site at the time, said the accident took place about 10 minutes after their morning break.

"After our break we actually walked back through the decking. And then about one minute later, once we were back at our workplace, the decking collapsed," he said. "If we had walked underneath it then, we would have been trapped."

He said it was "extremely lucky" that no one was killed in the incident.

"Tonnes of steel, concrete and other materials came down. If anyone had been between the two decks, they would have died instantly."

Security worker Tommy Combs, who witnessed the accident, told the News Letter that



**TREATMENT:** rescue workers tend to an injured man

Picture: Paul Faith/PA Wire

**RESPONSE:** emergency services at the scene

Picture: Alan Lewis/Photopress Belfast

the decking collapsed like a matchstick house.

"I was standing at my desk and heard a rumble. I went outside and the building was in the process of collapsing. Workmen were shouting and screaming. "It was like a matchstick house collapsing," he said.

Mr Combs said he then ran back into his office to make phone calls: "It was very traumatic at the time. Thankfully I've never seen anything like that happen before."

Kris Mill said he rushed to the building site as soon as he heard a loud crash.

"I saw them pulling two people out who just looked in shock, but as soon as emergency services arrived we were moved back from the scene," he said.

Brendan Collins, 23, said he was beside the building when the scaffolding gave way.

"I was in a lorry, pouring concrete. It looks like the supports underneath the building gave way, which caused machinery to fall on top of the workers," he said.

"I helped to rescue them. I ran in with four or five other fellows and lifted the machinery off one of them. He was covered in blood."

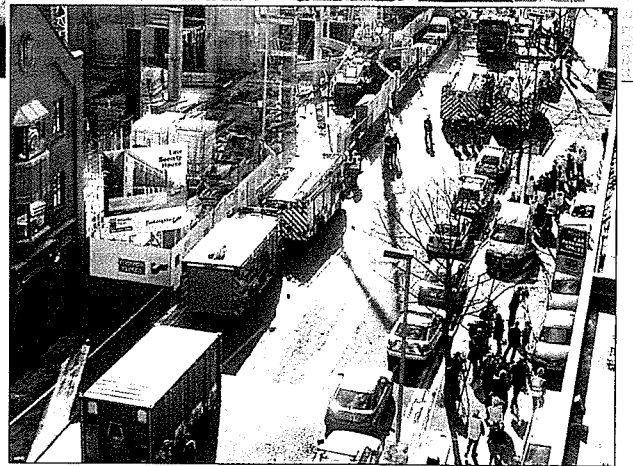
Ambulanceman Gary Richardson said: "There was a lot of confusion and chaos as people tried to work out what happened, but I have to pay tribute to my colleagues who dealt with the scene."

The building, due to open in 2009, is to consist of seven floors of offices with ground floor shops and underground parking.

Fire and Rescue Service spokesman Chris Kerr said: "Everyone is accounted for, but we'll now be making a thorough search of the scene to make sure that no member of the public has been caught up in the collapse."

A spokesman for the ambulance service said: "A lot of people have had a very lucky escape today. It was a very serious incident – but it could have been a lot worse."

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## 'I don't know how they survived'

AMONG those who witnessed yesterday's building collapse was construction worker Brendan Collins, who said: "It just caved in and a whole load of steel and a machinery fell on top of people.

"We were going to try and use a crane but we just lifted it off them until the ambulance people arrived."

Office worker Angie McKeown said she heard a ferocious noise when the building collapsed.

"There were people running everywhere and there was a terrible commotion," she said.

A passer-by who stopped to help with his friend, who is trained in first aid, said: "I don't know how anyone got out alive."

# office site collapses



**INJURED:** a man is carried from the tangle of reinforcing bars, scaffolding and wet concrete

Picture: Paul Faith/PA

## Construction firm tells of deep regret

BY GEMMA MURRAY

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TURKINGTON Construction, based in Craigavon, said in a statement released yesterday that they "deeply regret the incident, which took place at Law Society House".

"Turkington's managing director and their health and safety manager have been on site since [in the hours after the incident] acting on behalf of the company and liaising with, our sub-contractors, the health and safety executive and the emergency services."

A spokesman for Turkington Construction said their main concern was "with the employees of our specialist sub-contractor who were injured, and with their families with whom we are in constant contact".

He added that they are "now working closely with the Health and Safety executive to investigate the causes of the incident and to ensure the site is secured to the public and our workforce".

Alan Hunter, chief executive of the Law Society, said: "We were shocked to hear of the accident at the building site. We wish all those who have been hurt a speedy recovery."

"The Law Society left the old building in Victoria Street almost a year ago to move to temporary premises in Linenhall Street in Belfast."

"The old building was demolished to make way for our new offices, which are due for completion in 2009."

## Six pulled from wrecked building

BY KATE CHAMBRÉ

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SCENES of shock, horror and disbelief ensued in Belfast city centre yesterday morning after steel girders, scaffolding, concrete slabs and other building materials crashed to the ground at a construction site, injuring six men.

The heap of rubble was on clear view at the Victoria Street site as a large contingent of emergency service personnel attended the incident.

Throughout the morning hundreds of people, including construction workers from nearby sites, gathered to observe the

scene at the site where a new office block is being built for the Northern Ireland Law Society.

Meanwhile, sections of the road were cordoned off for the best part of the day to allow fire service workers and police officers to conduct a thorough search of the area.

Many onlookers said that they had never come across an incident like it before in Northern Ireland, adding that they were more used to seeing such scenes in a television drama.

Construction worker Karl Jordan, who has been working for several months on the Victoria Square development, said he was "shocked" by what had happened.

"It's the reality of building sites

and shows how dangerous the industry is. I have never seen anything like it before. I've only heard about accidents like this before through hearsay."

Colin Tweedy and his wife Dorothy said they "couldn't believe" what had happened.

"It's shocking. I have never seen anything like this happen in Belfast before," Colin said.

Dorothy added: "It's an absolute disaster. This is the kind of accident you would usually see on a TV programme like Casualty."

Michael Kimble, the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians Northern Ireland representative, said workers who were on-site at the time of the accident

were trying to come to terms with what happened.

"Two were trapped under a presser and another two were trapped under reburst steel. However, one of the guys' injuries were not thought to be too bad," Mr Kimble said. "Two of the guys were Polish. Everyone who was working at the site has been accounted for, but they are all in shock."

First Minister Ian Paisley expressed his sympathy to those injured in the building collapse.

The Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland closed down the site and said work would not be allowed to resume until it had carried out a full investigation.

This could take several days.

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