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Rescue workers search for survivors amid debris after the roof of a church collapsed during a Sunday Mass in Ciudad Madero, Mexico, Oct. 1. The Bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Tampico said the roof caved in while parishioners were receiving communion. (Jose Luis Tapia/El Sol de Tampico via AP)

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Ciudad Madero, Mexico — October 2, 2023

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State police had initially estimated about 100 people were inside the church in the Gulf coast city of Ciudad Madero when it collapsed during a baptism Sunday, and said that approximately 30 parishioners may have been trapped in the rubble when the roof caved in.

But Tamaulipas state Gov. Américo Villarreal later said only 70 were believed to have been inside. That represented a kind of miracle in itself; a parish priest said that just minutes before, a Sunday mass attended by as many as 300 people had just ended and people had exited the church moments before the collapse.

Villarreal said that, after sending search dogs and thermal imaging cameras under the collapsed concrete slab, it appeared that nobody was still trapped, apart from the 10 bodies already recovered.

"The most likely thing, I can't affirm it 100%, is that there aren't any more people trapped," Villarreal said. Describing the searches by dogs and rescue teams, he said "there are no indications of life inside the collapsed area."

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That optimism will be put to the test when cranes start lifting chunks of the collapsed slab off the floor and the tops of pews. The state civil defense office said that the search and rescue stage of the operation had ended the morning of Oct. 2.

The state security spokesman's office said early Oct. 2 that 23 of the 60 injured remain hospitalized, with two in serious condition.

The collapse occurred Oct. 1 at the Santa Cruz church in the Gulf coast city of Ciudad Madero, next to the port city of Tampico, just as a mass baptism was being held.

Three of the dead were children, and on the list of people who had been injured were a 4-month-old baby, three 5-year-olds and two 9-year-olds.

"Unfortunately, the elderly and children were those who suffered the most, the ones who were most trapped, the ones who suffered the most deaths, I think," said Fr. Pablo Galván, a priest who was just outside in the church parking lot Oct. 1 when the collapse occurred. He had just finished celebrating the main Mass.

Describing that moment, Galván said "the roof just simply and plainly collapsed, like an implosion, like when you crush a can."

"It fell, there was no time to do anything. It was like two seconds. We still can't understand what happened," Galván said.



Rescue workers search for survivors amid debris after the roof of a church collapsed during a Sunday Mass in Ciudad Madero, Mexico, Oct. 1. (Alejandro de Angel/El Sol de Tampico via AP)

Questions immediately turned to why the concrete and brick structure failed so suddenly. Security camera footage from about a block away showed the unusual, gabled roof simply collapsed downward. The walls did not appear to have been blown outward, nor was there any indication of an explosion, or anything other than simple structural failure.

The state security spokesman's office said it appeared to be "a structural failure." But Villarreal said no problems with the church had been reported previously.

"It was over 50 years old, it was here functioning and operating with no problem, with no sign of any defect," Villarreal said.

The roof appeared to be made of relatively thin poured concrete, and photos distributed by state authorities showed the roof slab resting on the top of pews in some parts of the church. That may have left enough space to have saved some lives.

Building collapses are common in Mexico during earthquakes, but the National Seismological Service did not report any seismic activity strong enough to cause such damage at the time of the collapse. Nor was there any immediate indication of an explosion.

Ciudad Madero is about 310 miles (500 kilometers) south of Brownsville, Texas. Tamaulipas is known for drug cartel violence, but Ciudad Madero is in the southern part of the state near neighboring Veracruz state and has been less touched by the violence.