

## Brazil Goes on Mourning and Arrests Owner of Nightclub Where Fire Killed 231

Written by Newsroom

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The Brazilian police have arrested today one of the owners of the nightclub Kiss and two members of the Gurizada Fandangueira band. A fire started when the musical group used fireworks during their show killed 231 people in the nightclub in Santa Maria, a city in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul.

Elissandro Sphor, known as Kiko, one of the owners of the nightclub, was arrested at a hospital in Cruz Alta. The band's lead singer was arrested during the wake for Danilo Jaques, the accordion player for the band.

Sphor is under observation for having inhaled smoke and should stay two more days in the hospital. Another owner of the nightclub is also being sought by the police but he hasn't been located.

Brazil declared on Sunday three days of national mourning and flags at half mast following the tragedy. The decree was made official and released minutes after President Dilma Rousseff landed in Brasilia after having visited relatives of the victims and the over a hundred injured in hospitals in Santa Maria. Previously she cut short her attendance to the EU/CELAC summit in Santiago de Chile.

"I think it is the people of Brazil and Santa Maria that need me at this moment," said an emotional Dilma Rousseff before abandoning Chile.

At least 231 people died Sunday early morning when flames raced through a crowded nightclub as panicked partygoers gasped for breath in the smoke-filled air, stampeding toward a single exit partially blocked by those already dead.

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Witnesses said a flare or firework lit by band members started the blaze in Santa Maria, a university city of about 225,000 people, though officials said the cause was still under investigation.

The city is approximately 300 kilometers from Uruguay and Argentina in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul and is the seat of the Federal University of Santa Maria with over 27.000 students.

Shocked survivors, mostly young adults described a frantic rush to the exits as flames swept through the club, with scores of people getting trampled and passing out from smoke inhalation. The metal barriers used to keep people in line on their way in, ended up blocking people from getting out.

Another 117 people were in hospital and the death toll from the inferno climbed rapidly as fire-fighters pulled bodies from the charred remains of the "Kiss" club, believed to have been packed with up to 2.000 revelers.

Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff cut short a visit to Chile, where she was attending the European and Latin American summit, to head to Santa Maria and oversee the response to the tragedy.

"It's a tragedy for all of us, and I cannot continue here at the summit, because my priority is the Brazilian people," the visibly emotional leader told reporters traveling with her in Santiago. "I would like to tell the Brazilian people and the people from Santa Maria that we are standing next to them in these tragic moments•.

She said federal and local authorities are mobilizing "all resources so that we do not just recover the bodies but also support families at this time and provide very efficient care to the injured."

In Santa Maria on Sunday afternoon the president left the gymnasium where she met with relatives of the deceased and injured without talking to the press. Before she has visited the hospital where most of the injured are under treatment.

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She was accompanied by Education minister Aloizo Mercadante, Human Rights minister Maria do Rosario and the president of the Federal Lower House lawmaker Marco Maia.

Brazil also quickly postponed an event dubbed "500 Days until World Cup-2014" set for Monday in the federal capital Brasilia.

"As a sign of mourning due to the tragedy in Santa Maria, Federal District governor Agnelo Queiroz, who is deeply saddened, has decided to push back the event that had been scheduled for National Stadium," his office said.

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Health Minister Alexandre Padilha told a news conference the government's priority was "saving the lives that we still can save."

The tragedy appeared to be the deadliest such blaze in more than a decade, since a fire in the Cromagnon disco club in Buenos Aires killed almost 200 and in Asuncion, Paraguay a shopping mall took the lives of over 300 people because of chained exit and emergency doors after a fire which broke out in a chimney of one of the restaurants spread to the whole building causing widespread panic.

In both cases faulty security and emergency measures caused the tragedies and the Kiss club seems to be a repeat of circumstances.

Reports said the fire broke out after 2:00 am when the nightclub was hosting a university party featuring a rock band using pyrotechnics, but authorities have yet to offer an official explanation.

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The discotheque's fire permit had expired in August 2011, the local press reported, citing Moises Fuchs da Silva, head of the state Fire Department.

Santa Maria fire chief Guido de Melo said the fire caused widespread panic, and that many revelers were trampled or died from smoke inhalation. He said club security blocked people from exiting, sparking panic and trampling.

Young men helped evacuate the wounded as fire-fighters doused the blackened shell of a red brick building with water and used sledge hammers to punch holes in the walls to get people out faster. The bodies were taken to a sports stadium that was blocked off by police to keep grieving family members from streaming in.

**Bzz/MP**