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Operation called off at midnight

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THE search and rescue operation for the family members of former Armed  
Forces chief Tan Sri (rtd) Ismail Omar was called off about midnight  
following the recovery of all victims.

The last body to be recovered, that of Ismail's wife, Puan Sri Azizah  
Abdul Aziz, was found underneath the rubble about 10.35pm. It was pulled  
out about 30 minutes later.

Selangor police chief Datuk Mohd Noor Hamat said police have called off  
the operation when all the bodies were accounted for. A full-scale  
investigation is underway.

The operation was conducted by the elite Special Malaysian Assistance  
Rescue Team (Smart) assisted by volunteers and additional personnel from  
the Armed Forces. Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak had excused  
himself from the weekly Cabinet meeting and was one of the earliest  
ministers to have made his way to the scene.

As news of the incident spread, thousands of people gathered at the  
scene, joining a stream of dignitaries who were already there. Each and  
everyone of them recalled the 1993 collapse of the Highland Towers,  
located about 300 metres from Ismail's house.

Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin, Prime Minister Datuk Seri  
Dr Mahathir Mohamad and several Cabinet Ministers were among those who  
were the scene.

Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Norian Mai and the Chief of the  
Armed Forces Tan Sri Zahidi Zainuddin and other top brass of the police  
and army were also present at the scene.

The Prime Minister's wife, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, arrived  
at about 10am and joined family members at a temporary operations centre  
located at Melih Vcak's house.

Vcak is a Turkish expatriate working for a tobacco company. He moved  
into the house opposite Ismail's about three months ago.

Board members and staff of the Affin group of companies were also at the  
scene, anxiously waiting for news of their chairman and his family.

Immediately after Ismail was pulled out from the rubble, Najib alerted  
the Cabinet using the cellular telephone of the Prime Minister's ADC,  
Datuk Mohamed Ali. The Minister then made the first public announcement of  
the incident at a hastily-called Press conference at the roadside.

A total of 80 Smart team members and other uniformed personnel numbering  
close to 300 were mobilised for the operation, aided by construction  
experts and heavy machinery from a nearby construction sites.

Initial rescue work was slow and cautious. Rescuers had to make sure  
that their work would not harm those trapped underneath or endanger  
themselves. Tracker dogs were also deployed.