Two killed, one critically injured during Port Everglades incident

By Linda Trischitta and Ihosvani Rodriguez, Sun Sentinel
5:52 p.m. EDT, March 16, 2013

FORT LAUDERDALE—

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The two employees who died at the scene were Kenneth Krason, 49, of Boca Raton, and Mark Freeman, 51, of Coconut Creek, the Broward Sheriff's Office said.

Their colleague, Thomas Fischer, 49, of Margate, was critically injured in the equipment collapse and underwent surgery Friday, according to BSO.

A hospital spokeswoman said Fischer remained in critical condition Saturday.

Broward Sheriff Scott Israel said during its investigation, homicide detectives will be looking for cameras and other sources of evidence. "On behalf of the Broward Sheriff's Office, I want to extend a heartfelt sympathy to the families," Israel said.

The workers were making minor repairs to a passenger gangway when the accident happened, port director Steven Cernak said during a press conference Friday afternoon. The portable gangway connects cruise ships to Terminal 1.

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Cernak, who became Port Everglades' chief executive a year ago, declined to discuss any safety precautions the workers may have practiced.

"We treat safety as our No. 1 priority here," Cernak said. "We have training programs in place. We are trying to understand exactly what happened here today."

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration assures safe and healthful workplace standards but doesn't have authority to investigate Friday's incident, area director Brian Sturtecky said.

"Because they are public employees, per federal law, OSHA doesn't have jurisdiction," Sturtecky said.

OSHA says scissor lifts can be hazardous if used during bad weather or if they're overloaded with heavy gear; when guard rails are removed or if driven on unstable ground.

On Friday, the men worked on a concrete dock in sunny, dry conditions with low winds.

The National Weather Service in Miami has a wind speed sensor on the south side of Port Everglades Channel at North Ocean Avenue. Meteorologist David Ross said winds were sustained and blew from the northwest at 8 mph and gusted to 13 mph around the time of the accident.

The scissor lift can also be a relatively safe piece of equipment to operate and has built-in precautions, said Bill Powers, a salesman with ABC Rentals in Fort Lauderdale.

"It won't go up if it's not on level ground, the manufacturer builds that in," Powers said. "They don't want them to fall over. If it's sitting on an angle, it won't go high."

Without addressing the fatal Port Everglades incident, he said workers should use safety harnesses, adding that makers don't recommended raising a lift when winds reach 28 mph.

ABC Rentals insists that its customers — including electricians, painters and security companies — demonstrate an understanding of how a scissor lift works, Powers said.

"We've never had anyone injured in any way, since 1995," Powers said.

Two recent fatal incidents in Indiana and Florida have involved scissor lifts.

In 2010, a 20-year-old student-worker at the University of Notre Dame died while filming football practice when his scissor lift was blown over, OSHA said in a 2011 hazard alert about the portable equipment. OSHA said the platform was raised nearly four stories when winds exceeded 50 mph.

On Aug. 2, 2012, a construction worker who was removing asbestos at the Palm Beach Mall in West Palm Beach died after he fell 15 feet to 20 feet from a scissor lift onto a concrete floor, The Palm Beach Post reported.

The portable hydraulic platforms are used by college band and athletic departments and construction and other businesses, when music directors or coaches or workers need to be visible above a crowd or achieve hard to reach heights.

Falls continue to be a leading cause of death at construction sites and in general industries, OSHA's Sturtecky said.

"They are 100 percent preventable," Sturtecky said. "To avoid tragedies, he said managers should "plan ahead to get the job done safely, provide the right equipment and train everyone to use the equipment safely."

Staff researcher Barbara Hijek contributed to this report. Ltrischitta@Tribune.com 954-356-4233 or Twitter @LindaTrischitta

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