

The fire-damaged Monte Carlo hotel-casino remained closed to guests

Last Saturday, while inspectors checked the MGM Mirage's 32-story building for damage following the blaze that blackened the facade of the top floors, Ron Lynn, chief of the Clark County Building Department, said he did not know when he would permit the 3,000-room hotel to reopen.

„It's a little soon to tell," Lynn told The Associated Press moments before he and a team of six inspectors entered the building Saturday morning. „We haven't completed the testing today. But there is no damage to the casino area.“

The hotel on the Las Vegas Strip was filled nearly to capacity Friday when passing motorists reported seeing flames on the roof. No one was seriously injured. Casino owner MGM Mirage found rooms for displaced guests at its other hotel-casinos.

The Fire Department said the 3,002-room hotel must remove its roof façade, which sustained most of the damage, before it can be reoccupied, MGM Mirage spokesman Gordon Absher said in an interview. Guests were given rooms at 10 of MGM's other hotels, he said.

Most guests were allowed inside with security escorts during the night to retrieve belongings left behind when they fled, officials said. However, only hotel security and county inspectors were being allowed into rooms above the 26th floor, company spokesman Gordon Absher said. The blaze was contained within an hour.

An ambulance company spokeswoman said 17 people were taken to hospitals with minor injuries, mostly from inhaling smoke or from fleeing the building. None of the 120 firefighters was

hurt.

The spectacle brought to mind the state's deadliest fire, the 1980 blaze that killed 87 people at the old MGM Grand just down the street from the Monte Carlo. Since then, strict fire codes, including mandatory fire sprinklers, have been adopted for casinos on the Las Vegas Strip.

However, Fire Chief Steve Smith credited firefighters, not the sprinkler system, for quickly containing Friday's fire. He said it was an exterior fire fueled by a foam-like building material that was best fought from the interior. Firefighters entered top-floor rooms, broke windows and leaned out with hoses to aim water at the flames. „It's very precarious up there,“ Smith said. „They did expose themselves to some extreme danger. They could have fallen out.“

Smith said it was too early to assess damage or say what caused the fire, which began just before 11 a.m. There was no immediate indication of criminal activity or arson, but „nothing is ruled out at this time,“ he said. Officials were told welders were working on the roof before the fire, Clark County spokesman Erik Pappa said.

Ron Lynn, chief of the county Building Department, said five floors were damaged, mostly by water, but only a few rooms had significant fire or water damage. Lynn said it's possible the casino would reopen ahead of the hotel but he said that would not happen immediately. „We're going to recommission as if it would be a new building,“ he said.

Huge crowds formed to watch the fire, and traffic on the Las Vegas Strip was gridlocked as streets were blocked off. Nearby resorts were not evacuated.

The Monte Carlo Resort & Casino has 3,002 guest rooms and 211 suites. The resort, on Las Vegas Boulevard near Tropicana Avenue, opened in June 1996 and is modeled after the Place du Casino in Monte Carlo, Monaco.

A full-year closure of the hotel would reduce MGM's earnings by 27 cents a share on an annual basis, said Joel H. Simkins, an analyst in New York with Macquarie Securities Inc., in a note to investors today. That would be a "worst-case scenario, and unlikely," he wrote. MGM is estimated to have 2007 earnings of USD 2.31 per share, according to a Bloomberg survey of 22 analysts.