

ACCIDENT

Rescue effort begins after avalanche at resort

Two recovered from cavalcade of snow that buried in-bounds ski run near Kelowna; more guests may still be missing

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WITH A REPORT FROM THE CANADIAN PRESS

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A 50-person rescue crew spent more than four hours combing the area below the steepest peak of a British Columbia ski resort after a popular open run was covered by an avalanche yesterday morning.

Two people, a 12-year-old and 22-year-old, were partly buried by the avalanche, which happened just before 11 a.m. on the Parachute Bowl, a black diamond run on the Cliff at Big White Ski Resort southeast of Kelowna. That pair was rescued within minutes, but search crews, including two avalanche dogs, continued to hunt for two other people throughout the day, Michael Ballingall, a senior vice-president at the resort, said.

The two people were found safe in the resort's village last night, but there is a new report of a missing 21-year-old snowboarder. Mr. Ballingall said the search has been called off until dawn but people will continue looking for the snowboarder in the village.

"This is the first time an avalanche has taken place while the area has been open in the middle of the day," Mr. Ballingall said, adding that the search would continue until all the resort's guests were accounted for.

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"We've had numerous reports of missing people all day long," he said yesterday afternoon. "We know of one report of one missing person that is fairly accurate, and another unconfirmed report that the person was in the area and that person is unaccounted for. We suspect no one else is under the snow, but we continue with an active search just to make sure."

The ski lift leading up to a network of runs on the Cliff - an in-bounds area - was shut in the aftermath of the avalanche, which happened when a huge section of snow gave way at the top of the mountain and tumbled down the slope on either side of the lift. At the time, the resort was playing host to an avalanche seminar, and attendees joined in the search, Mr. Ballingall said.

Officials can't be sure until further analysis is done, but Mr. Ballingall speculated that the top layer of snow may have given way because of rising temperatures and sunshine.

He said the effort to identify the precise number of missing people was complicated by the fact that the rest of the resort remained open with about 10,000 guests.

Yesterday's is the latest in a string of avalanches to hit British Columbia in the past two weeks. In the most recent incident, on New Year's Day, one man was killed and another injured at Whistler when an avalanche struck the restricted area the pair were in.

Mr. Ballingall said the snow pack at Big White has been "very unusual," but that after avalanche probes done Saturday showed the slope was stable - including "hand bomb" tests that involve tossing an explosive charge into the snow - patrols deemed the hill safe and opened it yesterday.

Meanwhile, officials at another ski resort, North Vancouver's Grouse Mountain, have handed a bill to a father and son who had to be rescued on Dec. 29 after they went snowboarding in an out-of-bounds area at high risk for avalanches. A six-person rescue team was sent to extract the pair from what search officials called a "high-risk situation." The rescuers got the pair up an almost vertical slope as it literally collapsed behind them.

A spokesman for Grouse Mountain wouldn't disclose the amount of the invoice. This is the second time the resort has invoiced guests who required help after going out of bounds. The tactic is designed to get people to "take responsibility for their actions," the spokesman said.

Jim McAllister, management-services director for B.C.'s Provincial Emergency Program, said he worries that billing for rescues will become a trend.

"The major concern is that there will be delays in people notifying the lead agency someone is missing if they think they might get a large bill at the end of the day," he said. "At what point do you decide you're going to charge people for their misadventures?"

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