

Damaged New Zealand cathedral hit again by June quakes

CHRISTCHURCH, New Zealand - The Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament - already closed since last September's major earthquake - suffered further damage in the June 13 quakes that hit Christchurch.

Two construction workers were inspecting the cathedral dome on a platform suspended from a crane when one of the earthquakes hit. They escaped without injury.

The cathedral, widely regarded as one of the city's most beautiful buildings, had not been open to the public since a magnitude 7 earthquake in September. A February quake that left more than 180 people dead caused the cathedral bell towers to collapse, stained-glass windows to shatter, and significant structural damage, including cracking near the main dome.

On June 13, concrete floors on the outside of the basilica collapsed to the floor below, damaging arches that support the main dome. Walls on the back of the basilica were displaced horizontally by four inches.

Several shipping containers placed in front of the fragile north tower of the building after the February earthquake are believed to have prevented the collapse of that structure in the new quakes.

Plans by engineers to remove the main cathedral dome to reduce stress on load-bearing walls have been put on hold until further assessment can be made. The chairman of the Cathedral Management Board, Lance Ryan, said June 15 that engineers are carrying out an assessment of the building.

Christchurch Bishop Barry Jones spoke of "the stress and uncertainty" the series of quakes had caused. He said he was greatly reassured by the promise of prayers from other New Zealanders.