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2 potentially deadly toxins found in tower

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Building cleanup may take year

By STEVE GRIMANN

Two highly toxic chemicals were discovered in the tainted soot and ash of Binghamton's State Office Building yesterday, triggering a year-long cleanup which may cost millions, sources said last night.

The new chemicals — dibenzofuran and dibenzodioxin — are considered extremely toxic by experts, and in significant doses can cause death, a health official said.

Sources in Albany and Binghamton told *The Sun-Bulletin* last night that the cleanup considered a massive task two weeks ago now will be even more intense, lengthy and costly.

The Office of General Services, which owns the building and is in charge of the cleanup, will hold a news conference at noon today to discuss the "immediate and long-term" actions needed to clean.

State Health Commissioner Dr. David Axelrod met with the Office of General Services last night and discussed the new information.

John F. Hudacz, the deputy commissioner monitoring the cleanup, declined to discuss the future work when contacted at his home last night.

Sources stressed that based on the tests, there was no health danger to people in nearby buildings since the cleanup has been handled as a toxic chemical spill.

However, several officials said the state is now faced with an even more difficult public relations task to convince employees the building will be safe after the cleaning is completed.

Informed that two new chemicals were present, Dr. Arnold J. Schecter, Broome County health commissioner, said extra precautions must be taken to ensure contaminated material remains in the office tower and does not escape into the community.

"These are extremely toxic chemical compounds and the most potent kind," Schecter said. "We have to be much more careful."

Schecter said more vigilance will be required as the cleanup work progresses.

Scientific reports show that dibenzofuran and dibenzodioxin are frequent by-products when PCBs react with electricity arcing across malfunctioning circuits.

Fire and electrical experts believe the fire that has kept the building locked since Feb. 5 was triggered by an electrical malfunction in the main circuit board.

The 18-story office tower is polluted by soot and ash with 10 percent polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) covering every surface, including concealed sections behind false ceilings.

An official said the work now being done to remove the top layer of soot and ash will be

wrapped up and other work will cease while the state reassesses the current work.

Sources said officials believe the total cleanup of all sections of the building may include gutting the interior and destroying all furniture, although a final decision on the exact procedure has not been made.

Cleanup coordinators working to wash the top layer of soot yesterday experimented with several solvents — including Lysol, Lestoil, Sea-Whash and a mixture of mineral oil and alcohol — to determine which cleaned best. Those solvents may still be used to clean the additional chemicals, officials said.

The new chemicals were uncovered in the most recent set of tests completed by the state health department. The exact amounts of the chemicals could not be obtained last night.

A separate set of tests showed the PCB contamination level dropped from an average 163 micrograms per square meter on work surfaces as before washing and cleaning to about 11 micrograms per square meter after the washing.

Air in the tower contains 1.48 micrograms of PCBs per cubic meter — just above the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health recommendation of one microgram per cubic meter and below the federal Occupational Health and Safety Administration regulation of

100 micrograms per cubic meter. Officials have said they plan to meet the NIOSH guideline before the building is declared safe for reentry.

An unprecedented cleanup has been carried out for the past 22 days as the state works to return the building to normal, a process that has cost about \$600,000 — not including salaries for state employees reassigned to Binghamton for the work.

The discovery of the two additional chemicals could mean all the "hidden spaces" will be cleaned, a process that could take months, according to officials on the scene.

Schecter said he was also concerned that some cleaners who entered the building were not properly shielded, and he called for a thorough review of the process.

A series of tests conducted by General Electric Co. just after the mishap showed traces of the two new chemicals, although state officials decided not to act until their own tests were completed.

The new discovery will mean the displaced workers will find permanent homes in other buildings in downtown Binghamton, or at several state-owned buildings at the Psychiatric Center of the Developmental Center.