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**Weather summary**  
**ALERT:** Snow and strong winds Wednesday and Thursday; gale-force winds Saturday.  
Full forecast page 3

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# AVALANCHE

## TWO KILLED, TEN HOMES BURIED, 180 EVACUATE HOMES AFTER HISTORIC STORM



By **MARK SABBATINI**  
Editor

A massive avalanche Saturday morning triggered by one of the worst winter storms in Longyearbyen's recorded history killed two people, buried ten homes, forced about 180 people to evacuate their homes and may literally redraw the map of the city if dozens of homes beneath the eastside mountains are deemed too risky to live in.

The avalanche on Sukketoppen occurred at about 10:30 a.m., with a wave of snow up to four meters high knocking homes up to 80 meters from their foundations.

Atle Husby, 42, a local teacher and musician, died before rescuers could reach him. Nikoline Røkenes, 2, buried in her parents' home with her sister Pernille, 3, for two hours before being rescued, died Sunday at University Hospital in North Norway in Tromsø.

Nine people were hospitalized with injuries, including Anne Kristin Jakobsen, 44, who was buried alive under the snow and resorting to banging on a microwave oven to make enough noise to catch the attention of rescuers.

Arnfinn Engan, a Longyearbyen resident since 1997 whose home was among those buried, compared the situation to a war zone.

"We noticed nothing before the blow that violently struck the house," he said in an interview with *Avisa Nordland*. "It was an enormous blow. My wife and I had to jump out the window in a storage room to get ourselves out. The rest of the house was surrounded by huge accumulations."

See **AVALANCHE**, page 4

About 100 rescue workers, above, search for and dig out residents from ten homes buried by a massive avalanche Saturday morning in the center of Longyearbyen. At right, homes knocked up to 80 meters off their foundations by a four-meter-high wave of snow may never be rebuilt due to long-term questions about the area's safety, according to officials. Other residential areas near mountainsides may also be deemed unfit for habitation. Photos courtesy of private contributors.



# 'A double tragedy'

*Local teacher and musician Atle Husby, 42, and Nikoline Røkenes, 2, killed in avalanche*

By **MARK SABBATINI**  
Editor

One was a beloved teacher and musical icon, the other a toddler whose miraculous rescue proved futile.

Atle Husby, 42, and Nikoline Røkenes, 2, were killed due to the avalanche that struck their homes Saturday morning. While their lives and deaths took markedly different paths, they will forever be linked as the worst part of one of Longyearbyen's biggest tragedies.

"We could not afford to lose one – now we have lost two," said Svalbard Church Priest Leif Magne Helgesen.

See **TRAGEDY**, page 2



COURTESY OF BLÅMYRA

Atle Husby performs bluegrass with Blåmyra.

## Who's to blame and how to express your wrath

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## Corrections policy

When we screw up you'll know about it – on the front page. One of the big complaints about newspapers is they tend to bury corrections and clarifications deep inside where few people who read the original article see them. If we need to fix something, an alert box on the front page will state what story is in error and where the full correction is printed.

## Submitting material

Letters, columns, photos and other material are welcome, but we can't offer pay for published items since nobody here is getting paid at the moment. Submissions in electronic form (text, Word documents, JPEGs, etc.) are highly preferred, although typing and/or scanning of items will be considered on a per-case basis. We reserve the right to edit submissions for length, clarity, accuracy, libel and other reasons, but we will also make every reasonable effort to contact the author about any changes prior to publication.



GEIR BARSTEIN / SVALBARDPOSTEN

Svalbard Gov. Kjerstin Askholt reads a note of consolation from Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg during a memorial service Tuesday morning at Svalbard Church for Atle Husby, one of two people killed in Saturday's avalanche. More than 300 people attended the service.

# Father offers thanks

## TRAGEDY, from page 1

Husby was a teacher at Longyearbyen School and a musician involved with numerous projects, including the Store Norske Men's Choir and the bluegrass band Blåmyra. He died before rescuers could reach him.

"I'm thinking about how small we are when nature hits with full force," wrote Tom Ramberg, a retired school and city employee, in a post on his Facebook page Sunday morning. "I lost my best friend yesterday, and three small children lost their beloved father, and a small community lost one of its biggest assets in yesterday's avalanche in Longyearbyen, Svalbard (Huippuvuoret). I'm glad I knew him and totally devastated now that he is no more."

Laurits Finjord, a Telenor employee and member of the men's choir, said he found out about Husby's death relatively soon after the avalanche that buried his home and nine others Saturday morning. Finjord, who was helping coordinate rescue crews in Lompensenteret at the time, said he immediately had to console a young woman close to Husby.

"Two hours later she had to comfort me," Finjord said.

He described Husby as a natural musician, able to play the tuba, banjo, mandolin, sing and more in a wide variety of settings.

"You could just give him an instrument and he could play," Finjord said.

Nikoline Røkenes buried for two hours in parents' home with her sister Pernille, 3, was in critical condition when both were airlifted to Tromsø. She died Sunday.

Her father, Kim Rune Røkenes, who is Longyearbyen's energy chief, wrote the following message, posted at the city's website Monday afternoon, expressing the family's grief and thanks for those who tried to save her life:

"You are living in a nightmare you never wake up from and what has happened is incomprehensible. Cannot believe it. Pernille and



COURTESY OF LAURITS FINJORD

Atle Husby, center, performs "When You Wish Upon A Star" with other local musicians during a St. Lucy's Day concert at Svalbard Church. A video of the song is at [tinyurl.com/hdz44ol](http://tinyurl.com/hdz44ol).

Nikoline got away from us after the avalanche, and the digging started right away.

I vaguely remember that I saw hundreds of volunteers who were helping with the rescue and those who stood out there are some wonderful strong everyday heroes that we never give enough thanks to. Miracles happened and after two hours our kids found and taken to hospital in Longyearbyen and further to Tromsø.

Very cold, they fought for their lives, together with another who was in the same room. Pernille was a shockingly great joy when it was clear that she would be fine again and Nikoline an endless, bottomless grief that can not be described. Unreal.

It was a fantastic effort by all who were present at the hospital in Longyearbyen; they did everything they could plus a little extra. The same in Tromsø – they never gave up and hoped to the last. It was the best of the best who helped.

We have received lots of help and support from friends and family, the Svalbard family and hospital personnel – now there's just a completely hellish way ahead, but Pernille is the focus."

**There's more! Visit [www.icepeople.net](http://www.icepeople.net) for the complete story.**



COURTESY OF LONGYEARBYEN HUNDEKLUBB

A dog at Longyearbyen's kennels buries itself in snow during the historic storm Friday and Saturday.

# Dogs weather the storm

*They just buried themselves in the snow...if they'd been in their houses they'd have suffocated'*

By MARK SABBATINI  
Editor

A large subsection of Longyearbyen's population that was most exposed to the storm that resulted in Saturday's avalanche may be among those who weathered it best.

"The dogs just slept outside," said Christine Ireland, who owns four dogs at the kennels just outside the city limits. "They just buried themselves in the snow. I think they were quite happy. If they'd been in their houses they would have suffocated."

Green Dog Svalbard, in a message posted Saturday on their Facebook page, noted "we are all well at the kennel" about 10 miles outside town, with the dogs there behaving similarly by simply "pressing themselves together and sleeping....they're not Greenlanders for nothing."

Ireland, a student at The University Centre in Svalbard and a volunteer at Bruktikken, was among the numerous people who spent much of Saturday digging out the kennels at the edge of town, with snow more than meter deep above some of the doghouses. She said she got a text message at 7 a.m. telling you to come out to kennels as soon as the weather allowed, but couldn't get out of her seaside cabin across the street from UNIS until about 10 a.m.

"It was just incredible to see the amount of



COURTESY OF GREEN DOG SVALBARD

A dogsled is nearly completely buried by snow at Green Dog Svalbard on Saturday.

snow on the road to the dog yards," she said.

Ireland said they'd been digging for about an hour when they heard about the avalanche that buried ten homes in the center of town beneath Sukketoppen.

"I asked where it was and I realized my husband was walking to work along there," she said, adding he'd already reached his workplace when the avalanche struck.

"We gathered some shovels and went back to town," she said. But at that early stage "people didn't seem to be in chaos...we weren't aware of the magnitude of what had happened."

They returned to the kennels and spent several more hours digging out the doghouses, Ireland said. She then tried to go back to UNIS to do further work on her thesis, "but I couldn't really work or concentrate."

**There's more! Visit [www.icepeople.net](http://www.icepeople.net) for the complete story.**

## HEADLINES STOLEN FROM SVALBARDPOSTEN VERDENS NORDLIGSTE AVIS

### Expert: Damage from slide could have been much worse

Devastating as Saturday's avalanche was, the damage could have been far worse, according to Kjetil Brattlien, one of two avalanche experts from the Norwegian Geotechnical Institute who assessed the area Sunday. Longyearbyen's permafrost means homes are built on pilings, which prevented damage to the homes – and those inside – from being more severe. "There is enormous damage...(but) I think the damage would have been considerably greater if the houses had not been moved," Brattlien said. He said the quick accumulation of heavy snow resulting in drifts several meters high resulted in category four conditions on the Avalanche Danger Scale, the second-highest possible.

### Removal of wrecked homes blocking Vei 230 begins

LNS Spitsbergen started demolishing two of the homes destroyed by Saturday's avalanche on Tuesday in order to clear an access path to undamaged homes on Vei 230. Both homes are uninhabited and were empty when the slide struck. One of the homes was removed Tuesday, allowing people to retrieve blocked off vehicles. LNSS Administrative Director Frank Jakobsen said the second home will hopefully be removed shortly after Christmas, but additional snow forecast for this week may cause further complications. The homes in the avalanche area, regarded by many as an iconic symbol of Longyearbyen, were built in 1976. The area on Vei 230 was initially called Indianerlandsbyen ("Indian Village") because of the pointed roofs on the homes, according to the book "Longyearbyen – Historisk Veiviser" by Kari Holm.

### Report of polar bear in town during rescue proves false

In their midst of their frantic rescue efforts during Saturday's avalanche, officials with the The Governor of Svalbard's office received a report of a polar bear near the center of Longyearbyen at about 2 p.m. Police quickly searched the area between the town center and Nybyen and determined the animal was a reindeer.

## Weather forecast for Longyearbyen

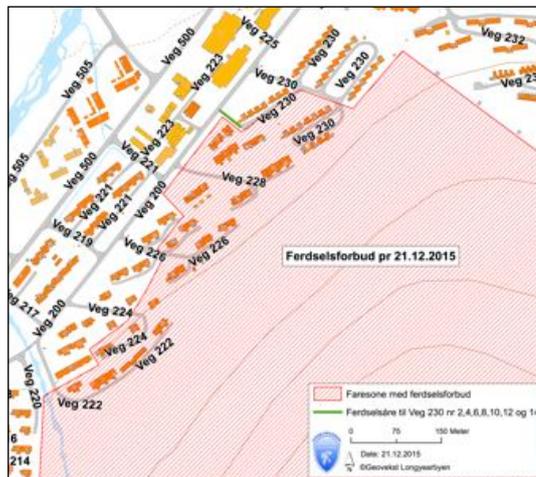
Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Snow. NW winds to 45 km/h. High -2C (-6C wind chill), low -10C (-16C wind chill).	Snow. NW winds to 29 km/h. High -1C (-6C wind chill), low -4C (-10C wind chill).	Partly cloudy. NW winds to 42 km/h. High -4C (-10C wind chill), low -7C (-13C wind chill).	Cloudy. Variable winds to 68 km/h. High -7C (-13C wind chill), low -10C (-19C wind chill).
24-hour darkness	24-hour darkness	24-hour darkness	24-hour darkness

**Extended forecast:** Sunday, cloudy, -8C (-15C), -10C (-19C), light 0:00h; Monday, p. cloudy, -6C (-12C), -9C (-14C), light 0:00h; Tuesday, cloudy, -3C (-7C), -8C (-13C), light 0:00h; Wednesday, cloudy, 0C (-5C), -2C (-7C), light 0:00h

Data provided by storm.no



An unoccupied cabin in Bjørndalen, top, became the 11th structure to be buried by avalanches sometime overnight Saturday. At center, a vehicle caught in a snowbank is among the many damaged or submerged by a historic snowstorm between Friday night and Saturday morning that resulted in drifts several meters high in some areas – and nearly bare ground in others. At bottom, a map shows the portion of Sukketoppen where a massive avalanche buried ten homes Saturday morning and the evacuated undamaged residences still considered unsafe for occupation as of Tuesday. Photos and map courtesy of The Governor of Svalbard.



### AVALANCHE, from page 1

More than 100 people, many responding to an emergency notice from the city calling for help and shovels, participated in rescue efforts. Extra medical staff and rescue teams with search dogs were sent from Tromsø almost immediately after the avalanche occurred.

The extreme snowfall and hurricane-force winds in exposed areas caused widespread damage throughout the city, including blowing the roofs off Longyearbyen School and a student dorm in Nybyen.

About 120 residents were forced to evacuate their homes near the avalanche area, at Gamle Sykehuset and all of Nybyen. Another 60 residents near the side area were ordered to leave a few hours past midnight Sunday. The city placed displaced residents in homes and apartments provided by locals spending the holiday on the mainland, Store Norske and others.

Those living in damaged homes who were forced to flee without money or credit cards were allowed to buy necessities at Svalbardbutikken at the city's expense. The Rabalder cafe at Kulturhuset offered free food to displaced residents, including opening at 3 a.m. Sunday to accommodate the second group of evacuees. The Longyearbyen Youth Center served as a gathering point for family members and loved ones of those injured or killed. Bruktikken was open daily for those needing free clothes, bedding and other items.

Two avalanche experts from the Norwegian Geotechnical Institute surveyed the evacuated zones Sunday, placing them in one of three risk categories. Residents of undamaged residences where the slide occurred, Gamle Sykehuset and Nybyen were allowed to return home Monday.

Those living in high-risk zones, except for the houses damaged by the avalanche, were briefly allowed to fetch urgent necessities Monday night and Tuesday afternoon. The governor's office, in a statement issued Tuesday, said daily monitoring of avalanche-prone areas will continue until further notice.

Longyearbyen Mayor Arlid Olsen told NRK the tragedy may reshape the city since there are questions about whether homes in the damaged area should be repaired or rebuilt.

"We need to bring in experts who need to consider if we can build and how we can build," he said. "But as I see the area now, I cannot imagine how people could feel safe there. So my immediate reaction is that we cannot build new there."

The disaster received extensive worldwide media coverage and tens of thousands of sympathetic messages were sent by individuals, including many of Norway's top leaders.

**There's more! Visit [www.icepeople.net](http://www.icepeople.net) for the complete story.**

**Much more storm coverage and continuing updates at [icepeople.net](http://icepeople.net).**

**Plus articles from our regular Christmas edition including:**

- The government's decision to provide up to 400M to Store Norske during the next three years for a "pause" at Lunckefjell and double shifts at Mine 7
- For those able to appreciate a lighter reminder of the uniqueness of our community, our annual "Svalbard's Ten Strangest Stories of the Year"

