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Asbestos threat keeps residents from homes

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TORONTO — Shattered glass and charred debris confronted weary residents returning home Monday following a massive propane explosion that transformed a Toronto neighbourhood into a fallout zone and sent thousands fleeing.

With an asbestos threat hanging in the air, one-quarter of the original 1.6-kilometre evacuation zone remained closed as emergency crews dealt with the aftermath of the Sunday's thunderous blast.

At some point before 7 p.m. Monday night, a body was located at the explosion site. Toronto police said the victim hasn't been identified.

Also Monday, the City of Toronto launched a review of all areas that could pose a potential hazard to nearby homes. People eager to return home stalled behind police lines, in search of such routine items as fresh clothes and wallets so they could go to work.

Some homes seemed uninhabitable.

Mario Dandrea pulled up in his car Monday morning and was turned away from his house by police.

"Our life is upside down right now, I've got our kids at my mother-in-law's house, I've got a dog with no food," Ms. Dandrea said. "I've got to get clothes to go to work, it's just a mess."

The neighbourhood, which is home to more than 12,000 people, around Sunrise Propane Industrial Gases was evacuated Sunday morning after the facility exploded about 4 a.m.

A series of spectacular blasts sent vivid fire balls into the sky, illuminating the area.

Many residents were allowed back Sunday evening, but the discovery of asbestos in the wreckage blast kept a large part of the area behind police cordons.

Toronto police spokesman Mark Pugash said the Environment Ministry had been called in and police were awaiting word from investigators on potential contaminants and toxins in the area.

"We need to know exactly the nature of any potential threat before we're in a position to move anybody into the area," Mr. Pugash said.

He told CP24 television that as many as 50 homes are just not livable.

Police began allowing some residents back into the area about 7:30 p.m. Sunday, while an evacuation centre remained open overnight so those who could not go home had somewhere to stay.

Early Monday morning, store owner Ron Cabezaus swept up glass outside his shop and praised the emergency response to the incident.

"Police did a really good job, they took care of the plaza," Mr. Cabezaus said. "It seems really organized."

Stuart Green, a spokesman for Toronto Mayor David Miller, said Monday that city staff have been asked to review all similar zoning areas to identify any other facilities that may be operating close to residential communities.

“I’ve asked city officials to provide me with an analysis and recommendations on what the City of Toronto can do through our zoning power in order to ensure that neighbourhoods are safe and remain safe when businesses such as this operate within the boundaries of the city,” Mr. Miller said at a news conference.

Thousands of residents were forced to evacuate a north Toronto neighbourhood early Sunday after Sunrise Propane Industrial Gases exploded shortly before 4 a.m.

Many are angry that the plant was allowed to operate so close to their neighbourhood.

Mr. Green said old municipal bylaws permitted the plant to operate in the area, and that all facilities with chemicals or gas must receive provincial approval.

Resident Dave Wisdom was able to return to his home Sunday night but said he is still in shock.

Mr. Wisdom said he saw propane canisters shooting through the air like rockets – something he said should not happen in a residential area.

“I’m disappointed with the government that they would allow anything like a propane company to be situated where it is in the middle of a heavy residential area,” he said.

“They should have known better. What were they thinking?”

One veteran firefighter died Sunday while at the scene and an employee at the propane facility remains unaccounted for.

A body was found at the site Monday night but police have not identified it and would not say whether they thought it was the missing employee.

A statement issued by Sunrise offered condolences to the dead firefighter’s family and colleagues and said company officials “pray” that their missing employee is still alive.

Officials said a witness saw the employee move toward the explosion.

“At present, we do not know anything about how the explosions occurred and we are waiting to learn about its cause,” the company’s statement read.

Bombardier Inc., which has its Toronto manufacturing facility in the area, advised its day-shift employees not to appear for work on Monday.