

AFTERMATH: BODY FOUND AT EXPLOSION SITE

Angry residents rally as homes remain shut

People shout about asbestos, and the hungry pets, medications and personal items they had to leave behind

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A cool summer breeze danced past the two-storey homes on Spalding Road yesterday, the afternoon sun reflected in shards of broken glass. The charred remains of Sunrise Propane sat on the far west end of the working-class street, while a few blocks away, near the east end, angry residents smouldered behind yellow police tape.

Sid Glass, 87, a diminutive retired taxi driver who has lived in the neighbourhood for more than 50 years, stared up at a stern-faced police officer.

"You mean that air over there is worse than this air over here?" he shouted. "I just need five minutes in my house, I need to go to my house!"

Only a few doors beyond the yellow tape, his medication and dentures remained beyond his reach.

Residents rallied behind Mr. Glass, shouting about asbestos, hungry pets, medications and personal items they needed "only a few minutes" to grab from their homes.

About 100 homes on eight city blocks remained closed off yesterday morning after a series of explosions at a 24-hour propane dealer engulfed a dark sky in a mushroom cloud of fire and metal debris and soot rained over the residential area near Keele Street and Wilson Avenue.

Last night police revealed that a body had been found at the explosion site just before 7 p.m., but the victim had not been identified.

Sunrise employee Parminda Saini has been missing since the fire. The only confirmed death has been that of Bob Leek, a Toronto Fire Services district chief of emergency planning, who died while surveying damage from the fire at the site. The 55-year-old collapsed without signs of traumatic injury and was taken to Humber River Regional Hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

Rows of broken glass radiated from the burnt epicentre of a blast that launched pieces of metal large enough to crush part of a bus shelter and knock over cemetery headstones hundreds of metres away.

Six people were taken by ambulance to hospitals, said Bruce Farr, chief of Toronto Emergency Medical Services.

"We're very fortunate," he said. "One would think from this kind of incident you'd have more."

Late yesterday, residents of three city blocks were allowed to return to their homes, though

police warned that gas and electricity service had not been restored.

But in the final breaths of yesterday's collective sigh of relief, tests confirmed the presence of asbestos near the site of the explosion, and residents raised concerns over the safety of their homes, when they will be allowed back and how their complaints about the propane facility in their backyard went unheard.

Rosanna laboni, whose home is less than a block from the propane facility, said now that she has confirmed her family is safe, her primary concern is "this asbestos and how close we were and how much asbestos is on our lawn and around the house."

Mayor David Miller said police have a plan for a staged return to residences as they are gradually cleaned of asbestos and get the green light from the Ontario Ministry of Environment.

Last night, several more affected blocks were opened and weary residents returned to their homes to inspect damage and change out of day-old pyjamas.

Acting Fire Chief Jim Shelton said no house collapsed or caught fire, but six have structural problems and need to be inspected by engineers.

Diana and Jules Vienneau were allowed to return to their second-floor apartment on Wilson Avenue yesterday morning and found hairline fractures in their ceiling. The couple said they hadn't received any information about whether their home is safe and they intended to check with police to make sure it was all right to sleep there last night.

"We will stay, if it's not dangerous," said Ms. Vienneau, who fractured her forearm while escaping the explosions.

Amelin Dela Rosa returned to her home yesterday evening to find that some of the siding beneath her roof had collapsed during the blast. Along with her husband and young son, she fled her house in slippers, clutching her purse, early Sunday morning, after her husband thought a plane had crashed nearby.

"We didn't know where to go because we were shaking," she recalled.

Ms. Dela Rosa, who eventually stayed with her sister-in-law during the evacuation, said she has house insurance and will survey any further damage before contacting her insurance company.