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## **Following massive blaze, Torontonians given all-clear**

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TORONTO — Boom after boom after boom, the successive blasts rattled homes, blowing doors off their hinges, shattering windows and leaving residents huddled in fear as giant balls of fire burst in the night sky and propane tanks were ejected several kilometres away.

But by Sunday evening, the all-clear has been given to thousands of Toronto residents forced out of their homes.

Acting Deputy Mayor Shelley Carroll said the evacuation has ended and residents will be directed home by police over the next few hours.

Where homes have been damaged to the point where residents can't re-enter, residents will be escorted back to the evacuation centre.

“The evacuation centre will remain open overnight to provide accommodation necessary and TTC will provide residents with transportation.”

Ms. Carroll also said Canada's busiest highway, the 401, is almost fully reopened, but a few exits will remain closed as the investigation continues into the blasts at Sunrise Propane Industrial Gases that rocked northwest Toronto.

“The fire is under control,” said Roy Law, acting platoon chief for Toronto Fire Services. He said there's still some controlled burning in one of the tanks, adding that the cause of the explosion is still unknown and the Ontario Fire Marshall is investigating.

The series of predawn explosions at a 24-hour propane dealer rocked the area immediately raising questions about the proximity of such a facility to a residential area.

One person, believed to be a gas-company employee, was still missing last night and a senior firefighter, district chief Robert Leek, died after collapsing while surveying the damages.

The cause of the veteran firefighter's death was not immediately clear. Officials said “it was not a traumatic injury.”

“It wasn't impacted by anything, it was just in the course of him performing some operations that he went down,” said David Sheen, Toronto Fire Services division chief.

“I don't know of any pre-existing medical conditions that could have contributed to this tragic accident.”

Federal Minister of Public Safety Stockwell Day said his heart went out to Leek's family and Premier Dalton McGuinty called the firefighter “a true Ontario hero.”

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 reads.

For most of the day, a section Highway 401 was closed, causing extensive traffic jams as weekend travellers tried to return home. A no-fly zone was ordered over the site.

“We knew it was a danger zone from day one,” said Vicki Arciero, one of several community members who had complained to the city of the presence of the propane facility near her home, in the north end of Toronto.

“It shouldn’t have been put in a residential area. It should not have been there. Nobody did a damn thing. Nobody. And now the damage is done.”

Ms. Arciero recalled being thrown from her bed by the first blast, then having to run away in her pyjamas with her children. Another witness, Joanne Crockett, said she had to flee as a massive ball of orange flames burst toward her home.

A 1.6-kilometre-wide swath of the city was empty for most of the day, like a ghost town, with shattered storefronts, splintered trees and doors and sidewalks blanketed by broken glass.

Residents were given the all-clear to return to their homes around dinner hour last night.

Mayor David Miller said that the city would review how residences came to be so close to a propane yard. “This facility was allowed under zoning that has been there for well over a decade,” Mr. Miller said in a teleconference call.

Ontario Fire Marshal crews couldn’t access the site for most of the day and didn’t immediately know the cause of the explosions.

Richard Hawrelak, an engineering expert, said propane explosions usually start because of a fault in the safety valve that lets out over-compressed gas, which builds up at the top of a tank of liquefied propane.

Canadian propane safety regulations aren’t as stringent as American or European ones, Mr. Hawrelak said.

Few details were available Sunday about the safety record of the company that operated the processing facility at 54 Murray Rd., Sunrise Propane Industrial Gases.

In 1997, the driver of a truck registered to Sunrise Propane was charged with careless driving after he went too fast and overturned his vehicle as it carried 31,000 litres of propane, forcing thousands to flee their Scarborough homes.

What triggered the explosions remained sketchy but Fire Division Commander Bob O’Hallarn said a Sunrise driver was at the scene when it started.

“He was filling up his truck and he saw either some smoke or some type of gas and went to report that and left the area. As he was leaving the area there was an explosion.”

Around 3:50 a.m. the first explosion rocked the area.

Ms. Crockett was awakened by her two rottweilers who jumped onto her bed after the blast knocked down her apartment curtain rods.

The 37-year-old ran to the front door of her building, and was huddled with her neighbours when the second blast came straight ahead.

“You just see a ball of fire coming towards you. Everyone standing at the front of the building ran,” she said. “It was huge.”

She ran back to her room and grabbed a bag, throwing clothes and belongings in – a few hours later she still didn't know what she packed – and grabbed her dogs Jaeger and Nova, their leashes, and ran.

“All you kept hearing was bang after bang after bang. About five of them were jet-loud.”

She ran out the back door and down the alley. She passed a man with a bleeding head, who said his front door flew off its hinges, striking him in the head. Windows were blown out of all the area's homes and stores, glass littering the pavement.

Ms. Arciero said the first blast “blew me out of bed. It just blew me out of bed.”

She thought lightning had struck the house, where she lives with her husband, two children, and a tenant.

“And then the second one hit,” she said. “My husband started yelling, ‘We've got to get down to the basement.’ “ As they ran downstairs, successive explosions rocked her home, a few houses down from a propane facility where the explosions were going off.

“We just huddled by the wall, with our kids, our dogs and our tenant. Waiting. You could see the fireballs, one after the other.”

After that, shouts rang out in the community for people to get out of their homes. Ms. Arciero ran – her kids in housecoats, barefoot – and left all their belongings.

“I swear to you, it was out of a movie. It did not feel real at all.”

Ontario Provincial Police patrollers from a nearby highway detachment were first at the scene as calls poured in to the 911 service. Toronto firefighters arrived shortly after and used bullhorns to order residents away.

While there were no toxic fumes, the evacuation stemmed from fears of further explosions from two tanker trucks filled with thousands of litres of propane.

Flames and debris rained down while some residents fled. Eight people suffered minor injuries.

With each successive explosion, the sky lit up and roared like thunder, witnesses reported. One elderly resident, Olga, said the glow from the blasts shone through her window blinds as if it was midday.

The fire was a seven-alarm blaze and involved 40 vehicles and more than 200 firefighters. Mr. Leek, the 25-year veteran firefighter who died, was surveying damage away from the active fire when he collapsed without signs of traumatic injuries.

“It's hard ... All of our guys are having a rough time of it,” a teary-eyed Mr. Sheen said, his voice breaking.

Mr. Leek worked in the Emergency Planning Research and Development Section. “He was very committed to his job,” said a co-worker.

Most evacuees found shelter with friends or relatives. Nearly 150 residents who were left homeless were taken to York University's Tait Mackenzie Centre.

Emerging from TTC buses that had transported them to the campus, the mostly elderly evacuees moved gingerly, one man leaning on a cane, a woman sitting in a wheelchair, a couple bringing along their dogs.

The university campus also became a spot for people looking for missing relatives. Pina

Petrolo spent an anxious morning wondering what had happened to her father, who had become separated from his wife in the confusion.

Suddenly, she spotted him in his truck and ran up to him, wagging an accusatory index. "You are in so much trouble," she said, scolding him for failing to contact his family more promptly.