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TORONTO PROPANE EXPLOSION: EXPLOSION: 'WE KNEW IT WAS A DANGER ZONE FROM DAY ONE'

Gas blast causes bedlam in Toronto

One firefighter dies, one man missing, thousands flee after series of propane explosions bring city to standstill

JOSH WINGROVE , TU THANH HA and MATTHEW TREVISAN

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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.

A Toronto neighbourhood of more than 10,000 residents had to be evacuated yesterday after a 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, a gas company employee named Parminda Saini, was still missing last night and a senior firefighter, District Chief Robert Leek, died after collapsing while surveying the damage.

"We knew it was a danger zone from day one," said Vicki Arciero, one of several community members who had complained to the city about the propane facility near her home in the Downsview area.

"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 from her home in her pyjamas with her children. Another resident, 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 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. A no-fly zone was ordered over the site.

By early yesterday evening, residents were given the all-clear to go home, and acting deputy Mayor Shelley Carroll said Highway 401, which had been closed between Highway 400 and the Don Valley Parkway for much of the day causing extensive traffic jams, was reopened.

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 from Vancouver.

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 normally lets out over-compressed gas that 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 yesterday about the safety record of Sunrise Propane Industrial Gases, the company that operates the processing facility at 54 Murray Rd.

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

"We pray that our employee Parminda Saini who is missing, is found alive and if so we urge him to contact the police," Sunrise Propane said in a statement, adding that it was co-operating with the investigation.

"We regret the discomfort and inconvenience caused to all those who've been affected by this."

Yesterday, for thousands living between Keele and Dufferin Streets, Sheppard Avenue and Highway 401, confusion and terror broke out before dawn.

What triggered the explosions remained unclear but Fire Division Commander Bob O'Hallarn said a truck 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 the curtain rods in her apartment.

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

"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, 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 the propane facility.

"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 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 911. Toronto firefighters arrived shortly after and used bullhorns to direct 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 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 Fire Division Chief David Sheen said, his voice breaking.

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

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

Propane evacuations

November, 2004

An explosion tore through a propane-storage facility in Bowmanville, Ont. Buildings within two kilometres of the area were evacuated.

There were no injuries. That facility was four kilometres from a nuclear plant.

February, 2003

Two trains collided near Melrose, Ont. One had six cars carrying propane, four of which blew up. Two people were injured and about 400 families were briefly evacuated.

September, 1998

A train carrying 15 cars filled with propane derailed near Hagersville, Ont. There were no injuries, and 250 people were evacuated.

November, 1979

A train carrying propane derailed in Mississauga. Two propane tanks exploded into a fireball, and toxic chlorine gas from another tank leaked into the atmosphere.

About 225,000 residents were forced to leave their homes for several days.

Josh Wingrove