



Explosion that rocked city could have been far worse

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Many more than two could have died if the blast had occurred during school hours

August 17, 2008

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Early last Sunday morning, thunderous explosions awoke thousands of Toronto residents. A large propane storage plant near the intersection of Wilson Ave. and Keele St. exploded, sending a fireball into the sky and, as we later learned, asbestos particles into the atmosphere. Soon after, the police arrived with bullhorns urging the terrified citizens of Downsview to flee their homes.

How can one comprehend the trauma of our fellow citizens upon receiving a knock on the door at 4 a.m., urging them to evacuate? Today they wonder if their children are safe from asbestos, if their homes are safe from structural damage, and if their neighbourhood and the resale value of their property will ever be the same after the fire at Sunrise Propane.

However bad the actual results of the fire – two deaths, trauma and property damage – it could have been far worse. Propane is an extremely flammable liquefied natural gas stored under pressure. Being liquefied, it is both easily transported and dangerous. When stored in large supply depots that hold thousands of gallons, there is no question that propane meets the Ontario Fire Marshal's definition of a hazardous material as a "substance or form that may pose an unreasonable risk to health, safety or property."

There are two well-known major propane disasters. In Spain in 1978, a propane cargo tanker passing near a campground exploded, killing 200 and horribly burning 100 more. In Mexico City in 1984, a propane storage facility blew up, killing more than 500. In Downsview, the storage facility blew up early Sunday morning. Two empty schools had their windows blown in by the blast. What if the explosion had occurred in September during school hours? Toronto dodged a very large bullet last Sunday.

Propane is not the only hazardous substance encountered in daily life. Industries release tonnes of toxic chemicals into the atmosphere, and hazardous materials are only one of the risks we face. An insurance company, Munich Re, forecasts that the world will endure three to five natural disasters per year, killing potentially 50,000 people. This forecast was not fear-mongering. In 2005, with Southeast Asia's tsunami and the earthquake in Kashmir, the total loss of life was over 400,000.

Months ago, the Centre for the Study of Democracy at Queen's University began a comparative study of the lessons learned from the management of disasters, including Winnipeg's Red River flooding, Halifax's Hurricane Juan and Toronto's SARS outbreak. While

the cause of the Sunrise fire is still under investigation by the Fire Marshal, many of the findings in the Queen's study apply to last week's crisis.

Prevention is the first requirement. Policy-makers must listen to scientifically-based warnings and prioritize public safety. What is truly shocking about the Downsview explosion is that, despite propane's history, it was only two years ago that Sunrise Propane's application to build a depot on an abandoned lumber yard was approved under old zoning regulations. The City of Toronto lacked a bylaw regulating such depots because the province had quashed earlier city efforts to gain such authority.

Site regulation, once under the Ontario Department of Consumer Affairs, has been hived off into the independent Technical Standards and Safety Authority (TSSA). This agency hardly inspired confidence by releasing an erroneous list of GTA supply depots. Some sites on its list had closed years earlier. If even the regulator doesn't know how many sites are active, how can the public have any confidence in the agency's competence?

Accountability is another major issue. In the privatization mania of the 1990s, the buzz words were "efficiency" and "value for money," but the propane explosion demonstrates the importance of accountability and safety. Ontario's municipalities should have the power to protect their own citizens, and Ontario's Legislature should review the mandate and performance of the TSSA and every other quasi-public authority responsible for public safety. The one question that must be answered in every emergency is: "Who is in charge?" In Ontario, we don't know.

Public information and understanding of risk is a third vital need. Until the Downsview explosion, neither citizens nor Toronto City Council members were aware of the location of major supply depots. Is the regulation and inspection of these facilities adequate? How do the regulatory and information regimes of the U.S. and Europe compare? The City of New York, for example, has a Community Right to Know bylaw, stipulating that companies have to publicize their inventory of toxic substances. Toronto needs the same protection.

Most often, citizens are left out of risk management planning. William Leiss, a former Queen's colleague, writes that there is "always more to a risk issue than what science says." The Queen's study demonstrates that usually there is a risk information vacuum. So it proved in Downsview. We need a Neighbourhood Watch-like organization for risk communication. Every neighbourhood should have an organized series of meetings to explain the potential of risk and how we should respond.

The world is dangerous, but we can mitigate the threats. The trauma of our fellow citizens in Downsview, and the nagging fear that it could have been so much worse, must galvanize the McGuinty government and the City of Toronto to do better. Next time we may not be so lucky.

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