



Body discovered at blast site

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About 100 homes still off-limits; some residents, store owners say they lack insurance

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While angry residents returned to their homes near the site of the propane explosions, an unidentified body was found last night amid the burned-out rubble at Sunrise Propane Industrial Gases.

Parmindar Saini, a worker at the plant, had been missing and was feared dead. Police refused to confirm the identity of the body, which was found just before 7 p.m. A 25-year firefighter, District Chief Bob Leek, died at the scene Sunday.

Some frustrated residents of the worst-hit area were still not being allowed back into their homes last night.

The price tag on property damage and compensation for lost business is likely to be tens of millions of dollars. Some residents and store owners say they don't have insurance.

John Santoro owns a rental property near the blast site. After a dozen people promised their support, he said he'll talk to a lawyer today about a possible class-action suit against Sunrise Propane and the city.

Mayor David Miller said Toronto couldn't stop the plant from being built in a residential area. Once Ontario's Technical Standards and Safety Authority had approved Sunrise's application, he said, the city's hands were tied. Miller, however, vowed to try to root out other potentially lethal combinations of industry and housing.

The blast at the propane distribution plant drove some 12,000 people from their homes.

"I think time of day saved us," said acting Fire Chief Jim Shelton. "No one was out of their houses, no one was sitting on their front lawns. The numbers of casualties we could have had would be tremendous."

The list of injured people grew to more than 60 but reportedly none of the injuries was serious. The same could not be said of property.

Six buildings were declared structurally unsound and will be assessed by engineers. About 100 homes remained off-limits because of fears about asbestos.

"The problem with asbestos is, when it's disturbed and becomes airborne, it becomes dangerous to people," Miller said. "We are unable to allow people in the vicinity ... until the Ministry of the Environment approves our plan for cleanup."

Before Sunrise moved to the Murray Rd. site, Miller said the Technical Standards and Safety Authority simply checked that it was properly zoned.

"The city does not give permission for a facility of this kind," he said.

A bylaw passed before amalgamation permits this kind of development, he said. Officials are unsure how many other such facilities there may be. But Miller said zoning powers may now exist to "prevent this happening again."

His words seemed unlikely to appease some seething residents.

"This is a case study in political sin," said Tom Morris, 48, who was still barred from his home last night. "The city keeps saying they have no record ... of any written complaints about the corporation. And that probably is true but only because they told us, the residents, it's a done deal."

Four years ago, Morris said, the lot was a car auction site. Then giant "SP" signs were posted everywhere. For the first year, it operated as a small business, "the kind of place someone would go fill up their barbecue," he said. "A little scary, but no big deal. Then, overnight, it was this massive operation."

Morris was one of the community members who led a series of town hall meetings with Ward 9 councillor Maria Augimeri. They dealt with a number of concerns, but Sunrise often came up, Morris said.

"Every time, Maria Augimeri would turn around and say, 'Zoning. They have every right to be there,'" he said.

"For the city to suggest they didn't know the community was upset, it isn't true."

Insurance experts said it's too early to tally the total blast damage.

Mohammad Ilyas has no insurance for his convenience store.

"I can't afford it," he said. "You never imagine something like this will happen."

Ilyas arrived yesterday to find his windows shattered, all the food in his freezers spoiled and a police car on guard. There have been reports of scattered looting.

He's not sure how he'll cope.

"This was the first time I've closed my store in seven years," he said. "I don't even close it during snowstorms. I can't afford to."

Giennina Zonta, 72, clutched at her heart as she spoke of how she and her husband, Antonio, 74, had complained in the past to the city about the plant. They never received a response, she said.

When the plant blew up, they fled barely dressed and barefoot. Their feet were bandaged yesterday. They spent the night with family in Woodbridge and bought clothes at Wal-Mart.

An emergency shelter was set up at York University's Tait McKenzie sports centre. About 25 people remained there yesterday.

Ken Dryden, Liberal MP for York Centre, issued a statement after visiting evacuees: "Again and again they asked, how is it possible that a propane facility like this was their next-door neighbour? As citizens, as government representatives ... their questions are our questions."

Bombardier cancelled the morning shift at its Downsview facility. Spokesperson John Arnone

said the building, north of the explosion site, had broken windows and buckled doorways.

"We regret the discomfort and inconvenience caused ...," said Sunrise spokesperson Dan Ronen, reading a statement from CEO Sean Ben-Moshe. "We are working closely with all of the agencies."

Home Depot offered residents free plywood to cover damaged doors, windows and roofs.

With files from Michele Henry, Robyn Doolittle, Emily Mathieu, Noor Javed, Daniel Dale and The Canadian Press