

Feds Probe Cause Of Puerto Rico Fuel Depot Fire

DANICA COTO Associated Press Writer — October 26, 2009

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — Federal investigators entered a smoldering fuel depot for the first time Sunday to investigate what may have caused an explosion that forced hundreds to evacuate and spewed thick, toxic smoke across the region.

Both the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives dispatched more than 60 agents each to the Caribbean Petroleum Corp. in Bayamon, just west of San Juan, said ATF spokesman Marcial Orlando Felix. Several agents flew in from the U.S.



In this photo released by Puerto Rico's police department, smoke billows from a gasoline warehouse and distribution center, belonging to the Caribbean Petroleum Corp. and owned by Gulf in Catano, Puerto Rico, Friday, Oct. 23, 2009. Crews struggled to contain a fire at a fuel storage facility outside Puerto Rico's capital following an early morning explosion that knocked out windows and shook the ground in the U.S. territory.(AP Photo)

"Processing the scene is going to be hard," Felix said. "It is big and complicated. ... They are going to take their time."

Felix said it was too early to say what might have caused the explosion or if someone deliberately caused it. "What we're interested in is whether someone committed a crime," he said.

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Luis Fraticelli, head of the FBI's office in Puerto Rico, expressed confidence the agents will be able to determine "exactly what happened."

He said graffiti found in three different locations in and near San Juan that read "Boom, fire, RIP, Gulf" were still being investigated.

"We haven't discarded anything," he said, while declining to say whether the message was relevant to the investigation. "We're keeping an open mind to all possible investigative leads."

The explosion shattered windows and sent tremors across the San Juan area, setting off fires in 21 of the site's 40 tanks that supply Caribbean Petroleum Corp.'s 200 Gulf gas stations on the island.

Crews on Sunday extinguished the last of the flames and the huge cloud of inky smoke that had towered over the capital began to dissipate. Hundreds of people who had been evacuated from their homes were starting to return.

"Life is beginning to go back to normal," Gov. Luis Fortuno told reporters. "The area is no longer in imminent danger."

Fortuno estimated the initial cost to fight the fire at \$6.4 million, but did not give a breakdown. A Caribbean Petroleum manager, Eric Guzman, said the company would reopen the facility.

President Barack Obama has designated the U.S. Caribbean territory an emergency zone and ordered federal aid to supplement local efforts.

Meanwhile, environmental officials began to clean areas surrounding the site. Both fuel and the foam used to put out fires had seeped into the ground and nearby water sources, said Luis Antonio Ocasio, spokesman for the Environmental Quality Board. Several ducks were found covered in oil.

The fuel-storage tanks exploded shortly after midnight Friday, sending earthquake-force waves that were felt in the capital of San Juan as well as Guaynabo, Bayamon and two other communities.

Several people were treated for minor injuries, and more than 1,500 people were evacuated.

Guzman said the company is cooperating with the investigation but said it was not yet known what may have caused the explosion. He declined to say how much fuel was in the tanks at the time of the explosion or what exactly workers noticed when they alerted a supervisor about a problem.

Animal activists said Sunday that they had rescued more than 60 pets from homes near the explosion.

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A total of 32 birds, 22 dogs and 10 cats are being kept temporarily at an animal shelter in the city of Carolina, just east of San Juan, said Maritza Rodriguez, president of the adopcionmascotas.com pet-adoption agency.

She says all the animals were found in good condition and that shelter officials will care for them until residents are cleared to return home.

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Associated Press writer Manuel Rivera contributed to this report.

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