Ammonia Leak at AL Plant Sends 120 to Hospital

An unidentified person is loaded into the back of an ambulance Monday Aug. 23, 2010 at Millard Refrigerated Services in Theodore, Ala. Authorities say at least 50 people have been sent to the hospital after a south Alabama refrigeration facility leaked up to 300 gallons of ammonia into the air. (AP Photo/Press-Register, Bill Starling)

THEODORE, Ala. (AP) — An ammonia leak at a coastal Alabama chicken distribution plant sent more than 120 people to the hospital on Monday, including four patients in intensive care, and forced residents to hide in their homes while warning sirens blared.

At least 29 people were admitted to Mobile-area hospitals, including the four in intensive care. Injuries to most of those admitted were not believed to be life-threatening, and others were treated and released, mostly for breathing difficulties.

"It was scary not knowing what the chemical was," said Teri Anderson, who lives near the plant and was first alerted by one of the sirens. She was told by emergency officials to seal her windows and doors, and shut off her air conditioner.

The leak also forced workers to evacuate one of BP PLC's main staging areas for the oil spill cleanup. BP said dozens of cleanup workers from its Theodore site were

among those taken to hospitals.

The leak was reported about 9:25 a.m. CDT at Millard Refrigerated Services, which uses ammonia in the refrigeration process for chickens that are frozen and shipped around the world. The plant on the Theodore Industrial Canal, south of Mobile, is among numerous chemical plants and factories in the county.

Between 400 gallons and 800 gallons of ammonia leaked at the site, sickening workers at the plant and the BP staging area, said Capt. Shaun Hicks of the Mobile Fire-Rescue Department. Most reported minor breathing problems, scratchy throats or dizziness, he said.

"They were walking wounded, but they were still having respiratory problems," said Hicks.

Hospital officials and authorities said more than 120 people were treated, including at least 52 transported by emergency services. Many went by private vehicle.

BP said 65 of its workers were taken to hospitals from the complex that's used for storage, boom decontamination and repair along the canal. The site, which was visited by President Obama in June and where about 500 people still work, was evacuated but will reopen as early as the night shift, the company said.

Emergency officials made telephone calls to alert area residents within one mile of the leak to remain inside and turn off their air conditioners, and children were kept inside an elementary school that was within the danger zone.

The leak was stopped by plant workers, Hicks said, and residents were told it was again safe to go outside by early afternoon.

Hicks said it was unclear what caused the leak, and a company spokesman did not immediately return a telephone message.

"It was very stressful for all of us," said Sabrina Greene, whose nephew is in first grade at a school where children had to shelter in place.

She said she had been having respiratory problems, and her brother said his eyes have been stinging since the leak, but neither sought medical help. They were alerted by one of the sirens.

Chris Booth, who works nights at an oil operation, was awakened when his wife phoned him to warn of the leak. He said he turned off the air conditioner, despite the heat index — a measure combining heat and humidity — hitting 105.

"It was plenty warm," he said with a laugh.

Associated Press Writers Jay Reeves in Birmingham and Phillip Rawls in Montgomery contributed to this report.

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