Gas Pipeline Blast Kills Four, 50 Homes Destroyed

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Emergency workers walk through an area of burned homes in San Bruno, Calif., on Saturday, Sept. 11, 2010. On Thursday, a gas line rupture caused a large explosion that killed at least four people and leveled dozens of homes. The crater is believed to be the origin of the burst. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

SAN BRUNO, Calif. (AP) — Patrick Yu has had nightmares and headaches since a fireball from a natural gas explosion caused his ceiling to crash down next to him while he slept.

He was one of many residents who returned to the ruined hillsides of their suburban San Francisco neighborhood Sunday after Thursday's pipeline blast and fire destroyed nearly 50 homes and damaged dozens of others.

The explosion prompted California regulators to order the utility, Pacific Gas and Electric, to survey all its natural gas lines in the state in hopes of heading off another disaster.

Returning residents were wearing wristbands that show police they live in the area.

Yu said he crouched in the doorway after the blast, thinking he was in the middle of an earthquake. When the shaking subsided, he found that the heat had warped the door so much he had to pull with all his strength to get out of the bedroom.

The 62-year-old learned Sunday that his house had been red-tagged, meaning it has extensive damage and will require closer inspection before authorities can declare it safe.

"I have lots of memories in that house," Yu said. "Lots of stuff you can't replace."

A few blocks away, houses have collapsed into black and white debris on ground, with a smell like charcoal in the air. All that remains standing is a row of brick chimneys, while across the street, some homes are undamaged.

Pat and Roger Haro fared better. They and their dog, Rosie, have been living in a hotel room since Thursday after fleeing their home with the clothes they were wearing, dog food, water and an iPad.

When they returned, their home was marked with a green tag — indicating less damage than others with yellow or red tags — and their electricity was still off.

"Once I saw the house was still there, then I felt a whole lot better," Pat Haro said. "I think we'll be a tighter community."

Investigators were still trying to confirm how many people died.

The remains of at least four people have been found, and authorities have said four are missing and at least 60 injured, some critically. Two people reported missing after the blast were located Sunday, city spokeswoman Robyn Thaw said.

San Mateo County Coroner Robert Foucrault said they're still trying to confirm whether some of the remains are human and identify victims.

At a service Sunday morning at St. Robert's Catholic Church, the Rev. Vincent Ring conducted a prayer for the victims.

"We turn to God and we ask for mercy upon all our brothers who are hurting so badly, whose lives have changed so drastically and whose help is so badly needed from us," Ring said.

Meanwhile, local and federal officials are probing the cause of the explosion that blew a segment of pipe 28 feet long onto the street some 100 feet away, creating a crater 167 feet long and 26 feet wide.

A risky segment of the gas line was due to be replaced, the utility responsible said, because it ran through a heavily urbanized area and the likelihood of failure was "unacceptably high." That 30-inch diameter pipe a few miles north was installed in 1948 and slated to be swapped for new, smaller pipe.

PG&E submitted paperwork to regulators for ongoing gas rate proceedings that said a section of the same gas line about two and a half miles away was within "the top 100 highest risk line sections" in the utility's service territory, the documents show.

The company also considered the portion that ruptured to be a "high consequence area" requiring more stringent inspections called integrity assessments, federal Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration spokeswoman Julia Valentine said.

Nationwide, only about 7 percent of gas lines have that classification, she said.

PG&E spokesman Andrew Souvall said the company had planned to replace the piece of the gas line mentioned in the documents with 24-inch pipe as a part of its broader proposal to upgrade infrastructure that the commission began considering last year.

Souvall said Sunday that no one complained to the utility's call centers of smelling gas in the San Bruno neighborhood in the week leading up to the blast.

He said the ruptured section, which was installed in 1956, was last checked for leaks in March. The company said later Sunday that no leaks were found.

The segment farther north was checked for leaks on Friday and none were found, Souvall added.

"We take action on a daily basis to repair our equipment as needed," he said. "PG&E takes a proactive approach toward the maintenance of our gas lines and we're constantly monitoring our system."

In ordering the company to conduct the leak survey on its natural gas lines, the state's Public Utilities Commission said Sunday that PG&E must give priority to higher pressure pipelines, as well as to lines in areas of high population density.

The order comes after Lt. Gov. Abel Maldonado, the state's acting governor, asked the commission to order the utility company to conduct an integrity assessment of its natural gas pipeline system.

The commission also plans to appoint an independent expert panel to help with their investigation.

Crews on Sunday packed into a crate the 28-foot section of ruptured natural gas pipeline blown out of the ground and hurled 100 feet in the explosion, said Christopher Hart, National Transportation Safety Board vice chairman.

Investigators were to ship the pipeline to the NTSB's metallurgy lab in Washington, D.C., for intensive examination, he said.

Also being shipped were two 10-foot sections of pipe removed from the crater Sunday from either side of where the ruptured section had been.

Investigators believed they had collected all the sections needed to reconstruct the metal pipeline but asked that anyone who found metal fragments in the blast area contact the NTSB. The agency also wanted to know of any instances of dead vegetation before the explosion, which could indicate a gas leak.

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