Fire Extinguished at Venezuela Refinery

JORGE RUEDA, Associated Press

PUNTO FIJO, Venezuela (AP) — All fires have been extinguished at Venezuela's biggest oil refinery after raging for more than three days following a deadly explosion, officials said Tuesday.

State television reported that the flames had been put out in the three fuel tanks that had been ablaze, and showed images of one tank smoldering. The smoke rising from the Amuay refinery had diminished markedly by dawn on Tuesday.

An official of the state oil company Petroleos de Venezuela SA said firefighters were working to cool down one of the tanks. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to speak publicly about the matter.

President Hugo Chavez had announced initial progress in fighting the blazes late Monday, saying in a message on Twitter that one of the tanks had been extinguished. That came after officials said earlier in the day that the fire had spread to a third tank.

The explosion early Saturday morning at the refinery killed at least 41 people and injured more than 150, Prosecutor General Luisa Ortega said.

Officials have said a gas leak led to the blast, but investigators have yet to determine the precise causes.

Criticisms of the government's response to the gas leak emerged from local residents as well as oil experts. People in neighborhoods next to the refinery said they had no official warning before the explosion hit at about 1 a.m. on Saturday.

The blast knocked down walls, shattered windows and left streets littered with rubble.

Amuay is among the world's largest refineries and is part of the Paraguana Refining Center, which also includes the adjacent Cardon refinery. Together, the refineries process about 900,000 barrels of crude per day and 200,000 barrels of gasoline.

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Associated Press writer Fabiola Sanchez in Caracas contributed to this report.

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