

5 to 15 People Killed in Fertilizer Plant Explosion

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Firefighters use flashlights to search a destroyed apartment complex near a fertilizer plant that exploded earlier in West, Texas, in this photo made early Thursday morning, April 18, 2013. (AP Photo/LM Otero)

WEST, Texas (AP) — Rescue workers searched rubble early Thursday for survivors of a fertilizer plant explosion in a small Texas town that killed as many as 15 people and injured more than 160 others. The blast left the factory a smoldering ruin and leveled homes and businesses for blocks in every direction.

The explosion in downtown West, a small farming community about 20 miles north of Waco, shook the ground with the strength of a small earthquake and could be heard dozens of miles away. It sent flames shooting into the night sky and rained burning embers and debris down on shocked and frightened residents.

"They are still getting injured folks out and they are evacuating people from their homes," Waco police Sgt. William Patrick Swanton said early Thursday morning. He added later, "At some point this will turn into a recovery operation, but at this point, we are still in search and rescue."

Swanton said authorities believe that between five and 15 people were killed in the blast, but stressed that is an early estimate. There is no indication the blast was anything other than an industrial accident, he said.

Among those believed to be dead: Three to five volunteer firefighters and a single law enforcement officer who responded to a fire call at the West Fertilizer Co. shortly before the blast. They remained unaccounted for early Thursday morning.

The explosion that struck around 8 p.m. leveled a four-block area around the plant that a member of the city council, Al Vanek, said was "totally decimated." The toll

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included 50 to 75 houses, an apartment complex with about 50 units that one state police officer said was reduced to "a skeleton," a middle school and the West Rest Haven Nursing Home, from which first-responders evacuated 133 patients, some in wheelchairs.

Other witnesses compared the scene the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, and authorities said the plant made materials similar to that used to fuel the bomb that tore apart that city's Murrah Federal Building.

Although authorities said it will be some time before they know how many lives were lost, they put the number of those injured at more than 160 early Thursday. West Mayor Tommy Muska told reporters that his city of about 2,800 residents needs "your prayers."

"We've got a lot of people who are hurt, and there's a lot of people, I'm sure, who aren't gonna be here tomorrow," Muska said. "We're gonna search for everybody. We're gonna make sure everybody's accounted for. That's the most important thing right now."

In the hours after the blast, many of the town's residents wandered the dark and windy streets searching for shelter. Among them was Julie Zahirniako, who said she and her son, Anthony, had been playing at a school playground near the fertilizer plant when the explosion hit. She was walking the track, he was kicking a football.

The explosion threw her son four feet in the air, breaking his ribs. She said she saw people running from the nursing home and the roof of the school lifted into the air.

"The fire was so high," she said. "It was just as loud as it could be. The ground and everything was shaking."

The town's volunteer firefighters had responded to a call at the plant at 7:29 p.m., Swanton said. Due to the plant's chemical stockpile, "they realized the seriousness of what they had," he said.

Muska was among the firefighters, and he and his colleagues were working to evacuate the area around the plant when the blast followed about 20 minutes later. Muska said it knocked off his fire helmet and blew out the doors and windows of his nearby home.

The main fire was under control as of 11 p.m., authorities said, but residents were urged to remain indoors because of the threat of new explosions or leaks of ammonia from the plant's ruins. Swanton said early Thursday authorities were not concerned about lingering smoke from the fire.

Dozens of emergency vehicles amassed at the scene in the hours after the blast, as fires continued to smolder in the ruins of the plant and in several surrounding buildings. Aerial footage showed injured people being treated on the flood-lit football field that had been turned into a staging area.

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Vanek said first-responders treated victims at about half a dozen sites, and he saw several injured residents from the nursing home being treated at the community center. Swanton said the injured rescued so far had been taken to hospitals in Waco and a triage center at high school in nearby Abbott.

About 100 of the injured were treated at Hillcrest Baptist Medical Center in Waco, where five people were in intensive care. Another 65 were taken to Providence Health Center in Waco. Officials said the injuries included broken bones, bruises, lacerations, respiratory distress, and some head injuries and minor burns.

Erick Perez, 21, of West, was playing basketball at a nearby school when the fire started. He and his friends thought nothing of it at first, but about a half-hour later, the smoke changed color. The blast threw him, his nephew and others to the ground and showered the area with hot embers, shrapnel and debris.

"The explosion was like nothing I've ever seen before," Perez said. "This town is hurt really bad."

Information was hard to come by in the hours after the blast, and entry into the town was slow-going as the roads were jammed with emergency vehicles rushing in to help.

The U.S. Chemical Safety Board said it was deploying a large investigation team to West. American Red Cross crews from across Texas also headed to the scene to help evacuated residents.

There were no immediate details available from police on the number of people who work at the plant, which was cited by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality in 2006 for failing to obtain or to qualify for a permit. The agency acted after receiving a complaint in June of that year of a strong ammonia smell.

In 2001, an explosion at a chemical and fertilizer plant killed 31 people and injured more than 2,000 in Toulouse, France. The blast occurred in a hangar containing 300 tons of ammonium nitrate, which can be used for both fertilizer and explosives. The explosion came 10 days after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the U.S., and raised fears at the time it was linked. A 2006 report blamed the blast on negligence.

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Associated Press writers Schuyler Dixon and Terry Wallace in Dallas, and Betsy Blaney in Lubbock, contributed to this report.

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