Obama Speaks to Families, Survivors of Texas Blast

DANNY ROBBINS & JOSH LEDERMAN, Associated Press

WACO, Texas (AP) — President Barack Obama consoled a rural Texas community rocked by a deadly fertilizer plant explosion, telling mourners Thursday they are not alone in their grief and they will have the nation's support to rebuild from the devastation.

President Barack Obama speaks at the memorial for firefighters killed at the fertilizer plant explosion in West, Texas, at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, Thursday, April 25, 2013. **(AP Photo/Charles Dharapak)**

"This small town's family is bigger now," Obama said during a memorial service at Baylor University for victims of last week's explosion in nearby West, Texas, that killed 14 and injured 200. Nearly 10,000 gathered to remember the first responders killed in the blast, a crowd more than triple the size of West's entire population of 2,700.

"To the families, the neighbors grappling with unbearable loss, we are here to say you are not alone. You are not forgotten," Obama said to applause. "We may not all live here in Texas, but we're neighbors too. We're Americans too, and we stand with you."

The April 17 explosion left a crater more than 90 feet wide and damaged dozens of buildings, displacing many residents from their homes. The Insurance Council of Texas estimates it caused more than $100 million in damage, and crews were sifting the rubble to search for clues to what caused the explosion or whether foul play was involved.

The blast came about 20 minutes after a fire was reported at West Fertilizer. Ten of

those killed were first responders who sped out to the nighttime blaze.

The memorial service honored those first responders and two civilians who tried to fight the fire and were posthumously named volunteer first responders. Among the dead were brothers Douglas and Robert Snokhous, West High School graduates who volunteered together for the town's fire department for more than 13 years.

As Obama spoke, the gymnasium lit up with the flashes of cameras and cellphones, glimmering like stars in the dimly lit room. The president spoke for 16 minutes, quoting scripture and lauding the men whose flag-draped coffins laid before him. "When you got to the scene, you forgot fear and you fought that blaze as hard as you could, knowing the danger," Obama said.

The service opened with a photo slideshow set to country music and projected onto a movie screen. It showed images of the men from their childhood, their weddings and other moments throughout lives filled with children and friends. Mourners were given programs with full-page profiles of each of the victims, describing their lives, their values and their faith.

Both the president and first lady Michelle Obama wiped away a tear as bagpipes sounded "Amazing Grace."

"How does one find such love to be willing to lay down your life so that others may live?" asked Texas Sen. John Cornyn, speaking on behalf of the state's congressional delegation. "This will forever be the legacy of those who ran toward the fire last week."

Texas Gov. Rick Perry eulogized the unpaid first responders, lamenting that each had a personal story and journey that drew to a close too soon.

"These are volunteers. Ordinary individuals blessed with extraordinary courage and a determination to do what they could to save lives," he said. "They're the ones who proudly said 'not on my watch' in the moments immediately following that explosion."

Perry's remarks were followed by video of the victims' grim-faced family members remembering their lives and expressing pride for their heroism. The brother-in-law of Cody Dragoo, another volunteer firefighter, remembered how Dragoo would leave notes for his wife, Patty, when he was traveling, and how he loved hunting and NASCAR.

Obama added his appearance at the memorial service onto a long-planned trip to Texas for Thursday's opening of George W. Bush's presidential library at Southern Methodist University. Bush sent his sympathies in a statement read at the service by Baylor President Ken Starr, the former special prosecutor who investigated President Bill Clinton.

Obama's solemn reflections at the memorial required an abrupt shift in tone by the president, whose morning in Dallas was filled with smiles, music and pageantry as

he and the other four living presidents celebrated one of their own. Less than an hour later, Obama was airborne over West, circling the scene of the explosion — still a harrowing site more than a week after tragedy first touched the small Texas town.

From his helicopter, Obama saw what looked like a massive construction site, with cranes and dozens of vehicles dotting a wide swath of brown earth. Piles of burnt rubble and scorched earth were clearly visible. Obama could also see the school field first responders used as a staging ground.

Obama has made such a trip countless times before, touring damage and consoling survivors of other disasters including Hurricane Irene, Hurricane Sandy and a string of mass shootings. It was just one week ago that Obama was in Boston, offering solace to the nation at a memorial for victims of the Boston Marathon bombing, another larger-than-life tragedy that compounded the nation's grief the same week as the explosion in West.

After the service, the president and first lady were planning to visit privately with relatives and friends of firefighters killed in the explosion, the White House said.

Fire trucks and other first responders' vehicles paraded through Waco en route to the ceremony at Baylor's sports arena. The vehicles entered beneath an archway formed by the ladders from two fire trucks with an American flag hung between them. Many of the mourners wore the uniforms of police, firefighters and paramedics and wiped tears from their eyes.

Brian Crawford, fire chief in the Dallas suburb of Plano, attended with 11 others from his department even though they live 100 miles from West.

"With these unfortunate circumstances, it's time to show we are all a family," Crawford said. "These were our brothers and they paid the price."

As the service drew to a close, a bell was rung once for each victim, reverberating through the hall and setting off a long moment of silence.

Then, with hushed sobs breaking the quiet, a loudspeaker re-enacting a dispatcher's radio identified the victims one by one, calling each firefighter to duty for the last time:

"Until we meet again. Dispatch clear."

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Associated Press writer Nedra Pickler in Washington contributed to this report.

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