8 Injured in Massive Explosions at Central Fla. Gas Plant

MIKE SCHNEIDER & TAMARA LUSH, Associated Press

TAVARES, Fla. (AP) — A series of explosions rocked a central Florida propane gas plant and sent "boom after boom after boom" through the neighborhood around it. Eight people were injured, with at least three in critical condition.

In this image taken from Associated Press video, flames rise from an explosion at the Blue Rhino propane plant in Tavares City, Fla., late Monday, July 29, 2013. John Herrell of the Lake County Sheriff's Office said early Tuesday that there were no fatalities despite massive blasts that ripped through the gas plant. Seven people were injured and transported to local hospitals. **(AP Photo/AP video)**

John Herrell of the Lake County Sheriff's Office said early Tuesday there were no fatalities despite massive blasts that ripped through the Blue Rhino propane plant late Monday night. Officials initially scrambled to find more than a dozen employees after the explosions.

"Management is comfortable saying all of those they knew were there tonight have been accounted for," he said.

Tavares Fire Chief Richard Keith said possible causes of the explosion may be either equipment malfunction or possibly human error. Sabotage was not suspected.

One person injured in the explosion was listed in critical condition at University of Florida Health Shands Hospital and three others were listed in critical condition at Orlando Regional Medical Center. Herrell said some others drove themselves to area hospitals.

The Blue Rhino plant, which is northwest of Orlando, refilled propane tanks typically used for barbecues and other uses. There were some 53,000 20-gallon tanks at the plant on Monday.

Herrell said a crew of 24 to 26 people was working the overnight shift when the explosions occurred around 10:30 p.m. Monday.

Tuesday morning, smoke still billowed from a storage container on the property, which consists of a couple of warehouses next to each other. The parking lot was littered with thousands of blackened 20-gallon propane containers. Nearby, three 30,000-gallon tanks of propane sat untouched. Officials said hoses designed to spray water on the large tanks in case of fire, didn't go off as planned.

Firefighters had to wait about four hours before they could go near the fire because the conditions were so dangerous.

Video footage on WESH-TV in Orlando showed fires burning through trucks used to transport propane tanks, which were parked at the plant. The fire sent plumes of smoke into the air hours after the blast.

Keith said the explosions shook his house several miles from the plant. "It truly sounded like a car hit our house," he said.

Herrell said about 50 homes were evacuated Monday night but residents were allowed back in about four hours later.

Marni Whitehead, 33, who lives less than a mile from the plant, said she was in bed ready to go to sleep when she heard a loud boom.

"It was like a car had run into my house, is what I thought had happened," she said.

She ran outside and saw other neighbors outside and then they saw the explosions.

"We knew right away it was the plant, the propane plant," Whitehead said. "After that, it was just sort of panic."

Whitehead likened the explosions to Fourth of July fireworks. "And it was just boom after boom after boom," she said.

Herrell said officials believe the fire was contained and wouldn't spread to another part of the plant.

According to the Leesburg Daily Commercial, the plant was built in 2004 and employs fewer than 50 people.

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