

Explosion at Dutch fireworks warehouse highlights lack of concern for public safety

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The explosion at a fireworks warehouse in Holland on Saturday, May 13 has left at least 20 people dead and 601 injured. Four fire fighters died trying to tackle the blaze that ensued and has devastated parts of Enschede near Holland's border with Germany. Local residents are demanding to know why the authorities allowed the fireworks warehouse to be located in the middle of a residential area. Prime Minister Wim Kok has promised an investigation.

The SE Fireworks warehouse was located in a poor working class neighbourhood and 400 houses were seriously damaged by the explosion, some reduced to rubble. A series of blasts sent concrete blocks and glass shards flying. There were fears of asbestos contamination from the roof of a nearby Grolsch brewery that caught fire as a result. Search efforts were stalled on Sunday by extreme heat from the smouldering rubble. Forensic teams are still searching the ruins for more bodies and evidence of the causes of the fire. Two hundred people remained to be accounted for yesterday, but the death toll is not expected to reach this high figure. Authorities said they hoped many of those unaccounted for were staying with friends or relatives and appealed for them to come forward.

Of the 15 bodies recovered so far, 12 have still to be identified. Six people are in intensive care units at local hospitals. Some 800 people have had to sleep in temporary shelters.

Aad Groos, the local Chief of Police, said arson had not been ruled out. Three businesses were burned down in the northern area of Enschede recently and fire fighters were called to another arson attack on Monday morning. Dutch safety regulations demand that explosives be stored in separate insulated bunkers, but the depot's entire store of 100 tonnes of explosives used in making the fireworks detonated.

The lack of knowledge of the nature of the warehouse's function contributed to the deaths that ensued. Fire fighters believed they were attending a routine blaze, but were then caught up in a massive detonation, which created a fireball. The blast was heard in nearby towns.

No local people were aware of the function of the SE warehouse. The building was constructed in 1977, outside the town proper. But the authorities subsequently allowed the construction of low-income housing around the warehouse, with no concern as to the safety risks when it comes to poorer sections of workers. This is not an isolated phenomenon. Town Mayor Jan Mans confirmed that the city was home to a second fireworks storehouse and claimed this was located in an industrial area to the east of the city. However, Dutch television has shown a demonstration by residents of a mobile home park situated near the second warehouse.

In total, 20 firms in the Netherlands have licences to store fireworks long-term for professional displays, and 40 other firms can store fireworks for individual consumers. The Dutch Firework Foundation told the media that most of the 20 long-term stores were bigger than that at Enschede and some were located in populous areas like the Hague and Leiden. The SE Fireworks warehouse is said to have met all existing legal and licensing requirements and was inspected as recently as last Wednesday.



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