

Belgian gas explosion: questions remain unanswered

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The death toll continues to rise after an explosion on a gas pipeline in the small Belgian town of Ghislenghien a month ago. Twenty-one people have now died. Over 50 remain in hospital, with the condition of over half being described as critical.

The explosion occurred at about 9.00 a.m. on July 30 in the industrial town just outside Ath, 40 kilometres south of Brussels. It sent a wall of flame into the air, triggering a chain of explosions. A leak was reported on the pipeline, which runs from the Belgian port of Zeebrugge into northern France, 37 minutes before the explosion. Firefighters attempting to establish a security perimeter around the site were among those killed when the explosions destroyed two factories in the industrial park.

The blast was heard several miles away. It melted or burned everything within a 400-metre radius and left a large crater between the two factories. Bodies and debris were thrown 100 metres into surrounding fields. One firefighter, Patrick Chevalier, described the scene as “the apocalypse, we couldn’t see anything or anyone, and then we began to find the bodies scattered around the area, completely carbonised. One colleague we recognised straight away by his shoulder badge, but it wasn’t possible to identify others”.

Casualties were taken to hospitals across Belgium and France. Police closed the adjacent motorway, and residents were advised to stay indoors because of the smoke.

As soon as the blaze was extinguished, investigators began searching to discover the causes for the blast. Although no official results have been published yet, the evidence presents a damning picture of private enterprise.

The pipeline is run by Fluxys, which runs the country’s whole network of pipelines. Fluxys is jointly owned by Royal Dutch/Shell, the French utility concern Suez Group and a group of municipalities. Fluxys confirmed very early on that the explosion was caused by a gas leak.

Five days after the explosion an unnamed construction worker told the newspaper *La Dernière Heure* that lax safety measures at a building site next to the pipeline may have

contributed to the explosion. He said that site managers insisted that deadlines must be met at all costs, leading to safety regulations not being observed. In particular he said that some firms on the site did not observe the danger zone designed to prevent heavy machinery being placed over the pipeline.

Construction work was taking place on the factory of Diamant Boart, which manufactures industrial diamond-cutting equipment. Thirteen of Diamant Boart’s 22 workers were injured in the explosion. Four were killed. Diamant Boart denied that the building work could have had anything to do with the blast, saying that it had been completed six weeks earlier and had been supervised throughout by Fluxys.

When Fluxys, under the supervision of judicial experts and federal security officers, examined the section of pipe that was recovered after it had been blown into the air, they discovered external damage. A notch 10 mm deep was found in the section of pipe that exploded. Safety regulations ban the use of mechanical diggers within one metre of a gas pipe, but Fluxys said that the damage could not have been caused by a spade.

Acting provincial governor Guy Petit told press that the damage was apparently caused by the building of a roadway over the pipeline several weeks before the explosion. Apart from the direct damage to the pipe, reducing its thickness, large jagged rocks had been dumped onto the site without first insulating the pipe with soil and gravel.

There has also been some speculation that the pipe was damaged by agricultural machinery. Prior to its use by Diamant Boart, the land was rented out to local farmers. Soil erosion, heavy rain and the use of large machinery are being offered as reasons why the pipeline was not 1.2 metres beneath the surface.

Fluxys say they are awaiting the results of the official enquiry, but have hardly been silent. Spokeswoman Griet Heyvaert drew attention to the requirements for gas companies to be informed of work taking place within 15 metres of a pipe at the same time as she stressed that Fluxys had visited the site repeatedly and had advised the

contractors of the location of the gas pipeline. At their six-monthly company meeting, Fluxys' management announced they would be filing a legal case over attacks on the integrity of their pipelines "at an opportune moment".

At the same meeting they decided to donate one million euros to organisations helping the victims of the blast. This was criticised by Professor Hubert Claessens of the Catholic University of Leuven, an expert in civil liability. "There is no reason why ... Fluxys should not compensate the victims. Looking at it from a strictly legal point of view, Fluxys is responsible ... Fluxys was managing the pipe network that exploded and is therefore responsible for any defects. The company has already admitted it by conceding that security has been tightened since the explosion".

As Fluxys and the building contractors seek to shift responsibility between them, it has also emerged that safety checks on the pipeline network are under-resourced. Dutch-language newspaper *De Tijd* revealed that the Administration for Quality and Security, the inspection team, has only 10 engineers responsible for checking 3,706 kilometres of pipelines. Ghislenghien was only one of a number of sites still awaiting inspection.

The Administration for Quality and Security has called for increased staffing levels. Energy Minister Marc Verwilghen has said that he wants to implement regular checks on pipes near building works.

None of this is satisfying the relatives of the victims, the residents of Ghislenghien, nor the workers involved in dealing with such disasters. The firefighters' union has called for stricter governmental regulations for monitoring gas pipelines. It has also called for standardised rules on how to handle gas leaks, particularly around construction sites. In the last week alone two more gas pipes have been damaged during building work in Brussels and Antwerp.

The relatives of French casualties have announced their intention to launch a compensation claim. Three Frenchmen were killed and another five injured in the explosion. The relatives are particularly angry that more was not done to evacuate the site in the 37 minutes between the leak being reported and the explosion.

Town authorities in Ath delayed the reopening of a second pipeline parallel to the one that exploded because they wanted further information and consultation on safety measures. Marc Duvivier, town leader, said, "We have listened to [Fluxys and Verwilghen] but now we want to study the question in detail to be able to reassure our citizens with the best possible information". The pipeline reopened last week, and will operate with a reduced gas flow until September.

Residents of Ghislenghien have also launched a civil action to ensure they are involved in the investigation into

the causes of the disaster. Charles Ronlez, spokesman for the residents, said that although they had suffered moral and psychological damage, they were not claiming compensation. Rather, they are asserting their right to ask questions of the investigators both now and in the future about Ghislenghien. Of the 192 residents interested in the action, 188 signed up to it. It now goes before a magistrate in Tournai.

Some victims of the blast face a more immediate financial crisis than compensation. Specialised medicines for severe burns are so expensive that INAMI (the national insurance firm for illnesses and invalidity) will not refund the cost. Those casualties who were taken to the military hospital at Neder-over-Hembeek have been receiving free treatment, as this is funded from the defence budget. But this does not apply to civilian hospitals, where INAMI will not pay for so-called Class D medicines.

According to local radio reports, doctors have been lobbying for burns treatment Class D medicines to be put on the refundable list, but without success. In fact, the government had already taken Furacine, a widely-used burns treatment, off the list. Professor Stan Monstreay, head of the Burns Unit at Ghent University Hospital, told the daily *De Morgen* of patients who had to pay 20,000 euros for non-refundable drugs.

This has proved very embarrassing to the government. Public Health Minister Rudy Demotte said that he had not found a solution to the problem, but victims of the explosion would not be saddled with the medical costs. He highlighted the growing class divide in Belgium, when he said that victims would not have to pay for the medicine if they had insurance for work-related accidents, or hospital cover. The victims of industrial burns are often the least likely to have extra insurance policies.



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