

Explosions rip through British oil depot

Paul Bond
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About 40 people have been injured, two seriously, and some 2,000 more have been evacuated from their homes following a series of explosions at Britain's fifth-largest oil depot.

The first explosion at the Buncefield depot, 40 kilometres northwest of London, happened just after 6 a.m. Sunday. Roughly 20 minutes later, there were two further blasts at the depot, which stores 16 million litres of petrol, diesel, kerosene and aviation fuel.

Defence Secretary John Reid and police officials said there was no reason to suspect terrorism. This is despite the fact that the explosions occurred four days after an Al Qaeda videotape appeared on the Internet calling for attacks on facilities carrying oil "stolen" from Muslims in the Middle East.

Buncefield is the fifth-largest of more than 50 major oil-storage facilities in Britain. One half of the depot was destroyed by the explosions, which ripped through some 20 petrol tanks.

According to eyewitnesses, flames shot 200 feet into the air, and windows were blown out up to half a mile away. A cloud of smoke 3,000 metres high rose over nearby Hemel Hempstead and was clearly visible from satellite images. The blasts were heard as far away as France and the Netherlands.

Local fire chiefs have suggested the explosions could prove to be the biggest ever seen in Europe. The tanks were allowed to burn themselves out, while about a hundred fire fighters worked to control the spread of the fires across the depot and an adjacent industrial park.

Police said the fire was under control within five hours of the explosion, but it is likely to burn for another day. Police were warning that the fires could still trigger more explosions.

Most of the injured were suffering from cuts and bruises. One person was said to be on respiratory support in the intensive care unit at Watford General

Hospital. Another person is being kept under observation in Hemel Hempstead Hospital. Local health officials are warning that most at risk are those who have inhaled the smoke.

Police are advising those who remain in their homes to keep the windows closed. Hertfordshire's Chief Constable advised people to stay away from the smoke, which could make them nauseous. Meteorologists are warning that light winds are likely to spread the smoke across much of southern England over the next day.

Schools around Hemel Hempstead are likely to be closed Monday because of the smoke. Stretches of two motorways have been closed, including part of the M1 (the major trunk road north from London), and may remain closed for another day. Some flights into Heathrow, Europe's busiest airport, were delayed.

The explosions triggered a wave of panic buying by motorists at petrol stations. Insisting that Buncefield is "strategically important, but not critically important," a spokesman for the Petrol Retailers Association said that the industry had emergency plans and that other depots could fill the gap.

Buncefield is 60 percent owned by Total, with the remaining stake owned by Texaco's Chevron. It forms part of a complex that is also used by Royal Dutch Shell, British Petroleum and the British Pipeline Agency. Buncefield is supplied by Total's Lindsey plant 150 miles away in north Lincolnshire. Total was unable to say immediately if the Lincolnshire refinery was still operating.



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