New York City: steam pipe blast kills 1, injures dozens

Bill Van Auken
20 July 2007

In what many in the heart of midtown Manhattan initially mistook for a replay of the September 11 terrorist attacks, an aging steam pipe exploded Wednesday, sending a geyser of mud and debris and billowing clouds of steam rising over New York City's skyscrapers.

The blast, which erupted just before 6 p.m. in the midst of the city's rush hour and barely two blocks from the huge commuter train terminal Grand Central Station, claimed the life of a woman, an executive at the pharmaceutical giant, Pfizer, who died of cardiac arrest. Nearly 30 others were injured, some of them burned by steam, while others were struck by rocks and glass that rained down on adjacent streets. The driver of a tow truck that was swallowed up in the crater created by the volcanic-like eruption remained in critical condition with burns over 80 percent of his body. One other person remained hospitalized on Thursday, also with severe burns.

The explosion shook nearby office buildings, sending thousands fleeing for safety. Given the experience of 9/11 and the campaign in recent days to whip up a further terror scare in conjunction with the release of a National Intelligence Estimate warning of a threat from al Qaeda, it was understandable that many office workers feared a new attack.

Fears were also raised about possible contamination with asbestos—a known carcinogen—which was used to line the 20-inch steam pipe when it was laid more than 80 years ago.

On Thursday, New York's billionaire Republican Mayor Michael Bloomberg told the media that initial tests indicated no presence of asbestos in the air, while some particles of the deadly substance was found in 2 out of 56 solid samples taken from debris and mud in the area. Bloomberg suggested that these limited samples may have included pieces of the insulation.

Officials of the city's Office of Emergency Management and Health Department, as well as doctors at the city's Mount Sinai Hospital specializing in asbestos contamination, also stated that it was "unlikely" that one-time, short-duration contact would pose a health risk. Shipyard workers and others who were exposed to it over long periods have years later contracted mesothelioma or asbestos-related lung cancer.

Nonetheless, New York City residents and workers in the area remained skeptical of these reassurances. This is due in part to the evident precautions that are being taken, including supplying cops and other emergency service workers on the scene with respirators, as well as plans for asbestos abatement that must be carried out on the streets and in the buildings surrounding the blast site. As a result, much of the area could remain paralyzed for days.

Those who were present in the area are also being told to bag their clothes and bring them to the site to exchange them for vouchers for reimbursement.

The skepticism was also fueled by the knowledge that both the federal government and the city administration of then-Mayor Rudy Giuliani lied about the air quality in downtown Manhattan in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Today, many of those who worked at the World Trade Center site have contracted debilitating—and, in some cases, fatal—respiratory conditions.

Con Edison, which runs the city's steam as well as its electrical system, also has its own record of concealing environmental threats. A similar steam pipe explosion in 1989 killed three people in Gramercy Park, while spewing large amounts of asbestos in the air. The company only acknowledged this fact after residents conducted their own tests, which revealed dangerous levels of the microscopic asbestos fibers, forcing the evacuation of two of the neighborhood's apartment buildings for months.

In the immediate aftermath of Wednesday night's explosion, Mayor Bloomberg organized an emergency news conference, where he reassured the city that

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terrorism had nothing to do with the disaster. “There is no reason to believe this is anything other than a failure of our infrastructure,” he said.

The threat posed by the deterioration of the city’s infrastructure, however, is far more prevalent than that of terrorism and, in some cases, could prove as deadly.

This latest incident comes almost exactly a year after Con Edison’s aging infrastructure collapsed under the impact of a heat wave causing nearly 70-year-old cables to fail and plunging more than 100,000 people in predominantly working class neighborhoods of Queens into darkness for nearly a week. This blackout entailed immense—and in a few cases fatal—suffering as residents were left without light, air conditioners or even fans in the midst of a sweltering summer.

There is every reason to believe that this latest catastrophe—like the Queens blackout—can be traced to the profit-driven policies of Con Edison, the country’s largest utility company, which places dividends to its wealthy shareholders above the investment needed to maintain a system upon which millions of New Yorkers must depend.

As a result, millions of pounds of steam that power the heating and cooling systems for some 100,000 buildings in Manhattan course each day through pipes installed in the 1920s, while much of the city’s electricity supply is carried over equipment that is more than 70 years old and prone to breakdown.

But the immense problems facing America’s largest city are not merely a matter of one private company’s avarice and negligence. Much of the rest of New York’s vital infrastructure was designed a century ago—when the city had one third its present population—and has been neither replaced nor adequately maintained.

The city’s water, for example, is supplied by two tunnels from upstate New York, one of which was built in 1917 and the other in 1936. Both of them are reported to be leaking badly, and a collapse could cut off water to millions. Though a third tunnel is being built, it will not be completed until 2020.

The city’s mass transit system also relies on century-old equipment. Pumps used to remove water from the tunnels were designed at the same time as the Panama Canal. Just hours before the explosion in Manhattan, flooding from a rain storm triggered the shutdown of several train lines and severe delays on others.

The storm also provoked street flooding in several parts of the city. With most of the city’s sewer system doing double duty for rain runoff, such flooding can overwhelm pipes, sending fecal matter and industrial waste into streets and waterways.

Nearly 10 years ago, the city’s comptroller, Alan Hevesi, released a report spelling out the decrepit state of the city’s subways, water mains, sewers, roadways, bridges, severely overcrowded schools and other basic infrastructure and estimated that it would take $48 billion—not including such privately held components as Con Edison—in investment to get them in working order.

Then-Mayor Giuliani dismissed the report as a “wish list” and made it clear that he had no intention of raising taxes on his principal constituency, the corporations and finance houses that make New York their headquarters, to pay for such improvements.

His policy merely perpetuated the neglect that began in earnest after the city went bankrupt in the mid-1970s and was subjected to strict fiscal controls that limited both spending and borrowing, making the scale of investment needed to maintain infrastructure impossible.

Bloomberg, a personification of the corporate and financial elite that dominates New York, is also determined to keep taxes low, even as Wall Street rakes in record profits.

The midtown steam pipe explosion is just one more warning that the refusal of the corporate elite to divert any significant portion of their profits into maintaining the infrastructure upon which their businesses—not to mention more than 8 million people—depend threatens New York with what one day could prove an epic disaster.

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