

US: Six dead, dozens injured in Georgia sugar plant explosion

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9 February 2008

At least 6 workers died and more than 60 suffered injuries in a massive explosion and fire Thursday evening at a Savannah, Georgia, sugar refinery.

The disaster is the latest in a series of devastating and preventable industrial accidents linked to the build-up of combustible powders, for which federal safety investigators recommended regulatory standards in 2006.

Local emergency rescuers worked through the night to contain the blaze. In a Friday morning press conference, Savannah-Chatham County Police Chief Michael Berkow explained that the structure was unsafe for rescuers to enter. With firefighters concentrating on removing rubble, the effort had “shifted from a rescue operation to a recovery operation.”

About 100 employees of Imperial Sugar were in the bagging plant within the Dixie Crystals factory where the blast occurred, and several remain unaccounted for as of this writing. Shortly after noon on Friday, local officials confirmed that six bodies had been pulled from the debris, but that the current number of missing stood at 10, and that as many as 17 could be dead.

Georgia Insurance and Safety Fire Commissioner John Oxendine told local NBC affiliate station WSAV that the facility could burn for several more days.

While details are thin and federal investigations could take months, Imperial executives have told the media they believed the source of the explosion was a build-up of sugar dust in a storage silo.

When a confined concentration of combustible dust is exposed to oxygen and a source of ignition, it may burn rapidly and explode out of its container, in this case, a silo. Even normally noncombustible materials can be highly explosive when ground into fine particulates and held in high concentration, and industrial facilities

frequently contain numerous sources of ignition, such as welding torches, and machinery that may become very hot, concentrate static electricity, or spark from friction during operation.

The company is the largest processor of sugar in the US. The Dixie Crystals plant, located within the city of Port Wentworth, a suburb just north of Savannah, is Imperial Sugar’s largest refinery plant, where major brands including Imperial, Dixie and Holly sweeteners are processed. The blast was reportedly so large that it was felt throughout the town, and surrounding houses had to be evacuated.

Asking for blood donations and charitable giving to offset the underinsured workers’ enormous medical costs, doctors at local hospitals told the media that their burn units were overwhelmed. Dr. Jay Goldstein at Savannah’s Memorial University Medical Center told the press that 30 to 35 patients, all in critical condition, were being treated in the emergency room. Most of the workers he saw had “significant burns,” according to local reports.

Three more workers, all in serious condition, were being treated at nearby Candler Hospital. Eighteen other workers had to be airlifted to the Joseph H. Still Burn Center in Augusta. A spokeswoman for the hospital told reporters that 15 of the injured were in critical condition and 3 were in serious condition.

Doctor’s Hospital Burn Center in Augusta is treating 17 workers for burns covering more than 30 percent of their bodies. Dr. Fred Mullins told WSAV Channel 3 that only three of the patients that had been airlifted were conscious, and the rest were in a “coma-like state.” Many require multiple surgeries and months of recovery, he said.

As with so many industrial disasters throughout the country in recent years, local emergency teams and the

broader community have exerted heroic efforts to manage the devastation but find themselves unequipped to cope. According to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, more than 100 police and firefighters were on the scene and an emergency triage was set up to immediately care for the wounded.

And in familiar form, executives have offered very carefully worded “thoughts and prayers” to families of the injured and dead. However, the explosion at Imperial was almost certainly preventable.

In 2003, the federal Chemical Safety and Hazard Investigation Board (CSB) began investigations into three major industrial explosions caused by combustible dust. The three explosions—at the Kinston, North Carolina, West Pharmaceutical rubber manufacturing plant, the CTA Acoustics fiberglass plant in Corbin, Kentucky, and the Hayes-Lemmerz aluminum-casting plant in Huntington, Indiana—killed 14 workers and injured 81.

The CSB’s data indicate that between 2000 and 2004, at least 127 similar fires were caused by the build-up of dust. Between 1980 and 2005, the CSB identified 281 dust explosions that killed 119 workers and injured 718. Injuries or fatalities accompanied more than 70 percent of the incidents, according to a 2006 CSB report.

The CSB investigation found that fire code officials rarely inspect industrial facilities to enforce state and local codes, and that the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration offered no comprehensive standard for combustible dust hazards. The investigation revealed that in nearly half of manufacturers’ safety data, no warnings were listed for powder build-up in the facilities, and only 7 out of 140 safety guidelines the CSB reviewed referenced National Fire Protection Association standards for preventing dust combustion.

While the Dixie Crystals plant had no safety citations listed since it was purchased by Imperial Sugar in 1997, OSHA spokesman Dan Fuqua told the *Savannah Morning News* Friday that an “undisclosed individual called in a complaint last November regarding the plant’s wooden floors in the shipping area, but plant officials quickly abated the hazard,” although he declined to give the paper any specific details about the complaint.

From scenes of the devastation, the factory appeared

to be a tinderbox. The factory was first opened in 1917 by Savannah Food & Industries and was considered a Savannah landmark.

“There was fire all over the building,” Nakishya Hill, a machine operator who escaped from the third floor of the refinery, told the Associated Press. “All I know is, I heard a loud boom and everything came down. When I got up, I went down and found a couple of people and we climbed out of there from the third floor to the first floor. Half of the floor was gone. The second floor was debris, the first floor was debris. All I could do when I got down was take off running.”



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