

Four dead, one injured in Wales refinery explosion

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Four workers were killed and another was seriously injured in an explosion at the Chevron Oil Refinery in Pembroke Dock, Wales. A joint police and Health and Safety Executive (HSE) inquiry has begun into the accident, which occurred the evening of June 2 in a 730 cubic metre storage tank in which the workers were carrying out maintenance work.

The dead include three male painting contractors and a female fire-watch officer. The fifth worker was airlifted to the Morriston hospital in Swansea to be treated for serious burns. He is described as being in a critical condition. The names of victims have yet to be released.

Witnesses described the explosion as being so massive that it rattled windows at a coastguard station across the bay. A local resident said that at around 6:20 p.m., there was a blast—“a whoomp rather than a bang”.

Huw Morgan, 83, who lives a mile from the refinery, said the first he heard were the sirens at the complex: “At first I thought the siren going off was just a test, but when I did go outside I saw an enormous black cloud of smoke going up like a mushroom. You could see it just mushrooming up. We didn’t hear the bang, probably because the wind was in the other direction”.

Shop owner Marcus Lutwyche said, “I ran to the front and saw a huge plume of smoke. It was black and filled the sky. It must have been 50 or so metres wide”.

Five fire appliances were mobilised immediately, including two foam vehicles, a chemical incident unit, a high volume pump, an environment unit and a control unit.

After the accident, Chevron temporarily halted all but essential work at the plant, and the Health and Safety Executive has taken charge of the section. By Friday, operations had resumed as normal, Chevron spokesman

Paul Bray told the press. “Given the very sad events, some feel it is difficult to work today, and we have counsellors on site”, he said, adding, “We don’t anticipate any disruption of supply”.

Chevron has announced it is launching its own investigation into the blast “in tandem” with the HSE inquiry.

Everyone concerned, from Chevron executives to local and national politicians, has been at pains to defend the safety record of the plant, which dominated the local economy. The plant has the capacity to process 220,000 barrels of crude oil per day, or 14 percent of Britain’s annual oil consumption. Employing 1,400 people, it is one of the largest in Europe.

John Davies, Pembrokeshire council leader, told BBC Wales that it had had “a truly remarkable and exceptional record of safety.... These things tragically happen. But we are prepared for these incidents from time to time”.

The local economic and political life of the county is dominated by the oil and gas industry; in addition to the Chevron facility, Pembrokeshire has another major oil refinery, operated by Murphy Oil Corporation, that produces 108,000 barrels per day, along with two large liquified natural gas terminals and a major gas-fired power station.

Last year, according to HSE statistics, 54 workers received major workplace injuries in Pembrokeshire. The year before, HSE recorded 93 major injuries.

There have been several incidents at the Chevron refinery. In July 1996, 26 workers were injured in an explosion and fire. On April 6, 1989, a fire erupted after 30,000 gallons of crude oil spilled from a pressure pump, leaving one man burned. On September 5, 2003, a fire in a steam plant injured two workers.

A former worker at the refinery told the *Telegraph*, “At a refinery you are working within a time-bomb, and at any time something can go wrong”.

Tony Spicer, 75, a former welder at the refinery, said, “It is inevitable that an accident would happen.... The lives of four people is a great loss. But this is not the first accident”.

The plant was sold earlier this year to US refining company Valero for \$730 million, and another \$1 billion for assets including Chevron’s petrol stations in the UK and Ireland.

Chevron Corp has said it sees no reason why the explosion should affect the plant’s planned sale, expected to close in the third quarter of this year.

Company spokesman Isabelle Guerin, said, “Right now we don’t see why this would impact the sale”.



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