Over 100 dead, others horribly maimed in Nairobi pipeline explosion

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More than 100 people have been killed, and scores horribly burned in Kenya, after a leaking fuel pipeline exploded Monday morning in a Nairobi slum.

The pipeline transports gasoline, diesel and jet fuel from Mombassa port throughout the country. A fireball ripped through the poverty-stricken Sinai shanty town, which the pipeline transverses, in Nairobi's Lunga Lunga industrial area sandwiched between the city centre and the airport. The inferno killed or maimed anyone within a 300-yard radius, incinerating shacks and buildings.

Television broadcast images of badly-burned corpses still smouldering in the streets and people leaping in streams to douse flames with their skin peeling from their bodies.

Daniel Mutinda, a spokesman for the Kenyan Red Cross, said that an "informal school" inside the slum had been particularly badly affected. "They have all been burnt," he said of large numbers of school children.

More than 75 bodies had been recovered by early evening, and 112 people taken to Kenyattal National Hospital with serious burns. Richard Lisiyampe, head of the hospital, said that many children were among the victims. The death toll is expected to climb, as bodies are recovered and understaffed and under-resourced health facilities struggle to cope.

The fireball was reportedly caused when petrol from a fuel depot, operated by Kenya Pipeline Company, ran into an open sewer. It ignited, sending a wall of flames throughout the shanty town. The flimsy walls and roofs of buildings collapsed like a pack of cards.

Wilfred Mbithi, a policeman at the scene said, "I've lost count of the number of bodies. Many had dived into the river trying to put out their flames."

Four million out of a total population of 39 million Kenyans live in slums—with 55 percent of the urban population housed in shanties made of mud and corrugated iron, lacking for the most part basic amenities such as electricity, water and adequate sanitation.

Such acute poverty drove large numbers of people who had gathered with jerrycans to try and scoop up the leaking gasoline when it ignited. They had no chance of escape.

The Kenya Pipeline Company on Monday admitted that its pipelines had caused the leak. KPC managing director Selest Kilinda also requested that the slum residents return any gasoline they had acquired before the blast.

Sammy Njenga, a 21-year-old unemployed Sinai dweller told the Associated Press, "I was going to the loo down by the river just after 4am when I saw the gold flowing from the pipe. I ran home and grabbed two jerrycans and went back to fill them up. As I finished and turned away there was a boom as the fuel ignited.

"I could feel the flames on my back and dropped one can so I could run further. But it spread so fast I dropped the other as well," he said.

"I had been standing next to a mother of three who wasn't fast enough. She died."

AP cited another resident Joseph Mwangi, 34, who said he had been feeding his cow when he saw people running towards the pipeline to gather free fuel. He had started home to fetch a can and join the others when he heard an explosion. AP reported that moments after interviewing Mwangi, he had "discovered two small charred bodies in the burnt wreckage of his home. 'Those were my children,' he said blankly, before collapsing on the ground sobbing."

Michael Muriuki "found the body of his 5-year-old

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daughter still smoldering," AP stated. "He ran to the river for water to put her out. He took a deep breath and struggled for control before speaking. 'Her name was Josephine Muriuki. She was five,' he said."

Hassan Lali, for the BBC in Nairobi said, "The scene is horrific, with charred bodies all around. I cannot differentiate between men and women or boys and girls. All that is left are bones, and the only way to identify the children is from their smaller skeletons.

"Many houses—shacks roofed with metal sheets—have been razed to the ground and plumes of smoke hang in the air.

"Residents are walking around in a state of shock. Most have lost family or friends, and they feel helpless, as there is nothing they can do."

Prime Minister Raila Odinga visited the scene and promised aid for the victims. Odinga also "visited" the Kenya Pipelines offices of the pipeline company but there were no words of criticism against the company, which boasts on its web site that it "was set up to provide efficient, reliable, safe and cost effective means of transporting petroleum products from Mombasa to the hinterland."

Instead, Odinga described the catastrophe as a "terrible accident", blithely passing over the extreme poverty and corporate neglect that ensured this was an "accident" waiting to happen.

Some 120 people were killed in 2009 when fuel leaking from a crashed petrol tanker near Molo, western Kenya, ignited a crowd that had gathered to collect free fuel. Every year scores of people die in similar incidents in the country. In the Sinai slum, shacks had been built on top of the pipeline.

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