

Mexican gas plant explosion kills some 30 workers

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An explosion that ripped through a Petróleos Mexicanos (PEMEX) gas pipeline distribution facility in northeastern Mexico near the US border Tuesday has left some 30 workers dead and dozens more injured.

The official death toll rose to 29 on Wednesday afternoon. PEMEX, Mexico's state-owned oil company, said on its twitter account that seven more workers are missing. A company official put the number at five, while warning that it could rise. At least 46 workers were injured.

The bulk of those who lost their lives in the explosion and fire were employees of a private contractor brought in to do maintenance work at the facility. Twenty-five of the contract workers are known to have died along with four employees of PEMEX itself. Part of the confusion over how many remain missing is the result of PEMEX trying to coordinate information with the contractor.

The explosion, which occurred at 10:45 am on Tuesday, ignited a huge fire sending towering flames and a column of smoke high over the facility, a gas distribution center located approximately 12 miles down the highway linking Reynosa to the city of Monterrey to the southwest. Reynosa is just across the US border from McAllen, Texas.

President Felipe Calderon said on Wednesday that the quick response of Mexican firefighters and army personnel helped avoid a "real catastrophe" that would have ensued had the blaze spread to a nearby gas processing plant.

Security personnel evacuated people from homes and ranches surrounding the facility for fear that the fire could ignite new and bigger explosions.

Initially, PEMEX officials tried to minimize the scope of the industrial disaster, failing to report the number of dead and injured early on and stressing that

the fire had been quickly controlled. As the toll of fatalities became clear, however, the company was compelled to recognize the seriousness of the accident.

PEMEX Director Juan Jose Suarez told the media that there was "no evidence that it was a deliberate incident, or some kind of attack," adding, "There is no reason to think that this terrible accident was caused by criminal gangs." What has been learned so far, he said, points to an "unusual accident."

The reality, however, is that accidents at PEMEX are far from unusual. The PEMEX refinery in Ciudad Madero on the Gulf of Mexico had a serious fire on September 2 which injured four workers. It was the second such blaze there in the space of 15 days. The company's own environmental, health and safety agency issued a recent report stating that the accident rate at PEMEX had increased by 28 percent over the course of last year.

Tuesday's disaster at the Reynosa plant is the worst since 2010, when an oil pipeline exploded in San Martin Texmelucan, outside of Mexico City, killing 29 people and destroying dozens of nearby homes.

That accident, like a number of others, was caused by people tapping into the pipeline to steal fuel. PEMEX estimates that last year criminals siphoned off 3.35 million barrels of oil, depriving the company of around \$1 billion in revenues. The company detected 1,324 taps in 2011, over twice as many as the previous year. A significant amount of the stolen oil has been driven across the border and sold to US oil companies, including Shell and ConocoPhillips.

The Mexican government has taken security measures to counter the stealing of fuel. Mexican army troops are stationed at major oil facilities, a practice that was intensified under President Carlos Salinas de Gortari in 1989 after he sent in the military to arrest

Joaquin Hernandez Galicia, known as La Quina, the powerful and corrupt leader of the corporatist Mexican oil workers union. What followed were sweeping job cuts at PEMEX and the increasing reliance on outside contractors.

Security measures at the Reynosa plant may have contributed to the death toll. Esteban Vazquez Huerta, an 18-year-old contract laborer who survived the blast, said that he and two co-workers were able to escape the fire only after finding a gap in the razor wire that had been strung along the top of a wall encircling the facility.

“We had to climb the wall from that side because the fire, the heat was reaching us,” he said, adding that he and his comrades were able to scale the wall only by boosting each other up. Whether others were unable to surmount this obstacle is not known.

Profits made by PEMEX, whose assets are valued at more than \$415 billion, account for one-third of the Mexican government’s budget. Mexico’s president-elect, Enrique Pena Nieto of the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party), told a meeting of businessmen in Sao Paulo, Brazil Wednesday that he wants to increase productivity and competitiveness at PEMEX, which he said would “only be possible through partnerships with the private sector.” He insisted, however, that he was proposing “modernization” of the state-owned company, not privatization.



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