

Explosion at Mexico City PEMEX headquarters kills 33

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Thirty-three are dead and 121 injured after an explosion rocked the B2 building of the Mexican Oil Company PEMEX on Thursday at 3:40 pm. At the time of the explosion, between 200 and 250 employees were in the building. The 13-story building is located in Mexico City, next to the 52-story company headquarters.

The explosion damaged the building's ground floor and mezzanine. Part of the basement also collapsed, trapping people in the debris. No official cause has been determined, but government sources were quick to blame an electrical substation that may have malfunctioned, triggering the explosion and fire. Six hours after the explosion, another section of the structure collapsed, creating panic. There were unconfirmed rumors that a bomb had been found.

However, on Friday morning PEMEX's CEO Emilio Lozola said the explosion appeared to be accidental. At the same time, he promised that an investigation would look into every possibility. It appears that both the B2 and the main building, which first opened in 1982, were in need of repair and maintenance.

Lozola also declared that of the 121 injured, 52 are still hospitalized. Initially, at a press conference that had taken place minutes after the explosion Lozola said: "The priority is to attend to the families. Second, I want to give assurances that PEMEX today is operating with no interruptions and that it is fulfilling its financial obligations." Foreign Minister José Antonio Mead backed up Lozola's words. Both indicated that the company's daily output of 2.6 million barrels of oil was not disrupted.

Very possibly, Lozola's and Mead's quick assurances to the financial sector were part of the Mexican government's damage control response, which was managed by President Peña Nieto and

Governance Secretary Osorio Chong. An official line was quickly arrived at and distributed to the media and to social networks.

The *Wall Street Journal* pointed out that PEMEX's relatively "rosy" accident record is facilitated by the fact that "most of the people who have died have been contract workers, or others killed by fuel leaks or gas explosions—victims who aren't counted as workers for the purpose of reporting industrial accident rates."

This is the second deadly explosion at a PEMEX facility in less than one year. Last September, a fire at a plant in Reynosa, Tamaulipas State, near the US border, killed 30 workers; 25 of them temporary workers under contract. Earlier that month a fire at the PEMEX refinery in Ciudad Madero, on the Gulf for Mexico, injured four workers. No explanation has been made public for the Reynosa fire.

In 2010, an oil pipeline ruptured near the central Mexican town of San Martin Texmelucan, killing 30 people. In 1984 an explosion in a gas plant near Mexico City killed 500 people. In 1992 gasoline that had leaked into Guadalajara sewers exploded, killing 252 people, and leaving 15,000 homeless.

The explosion and fire took place as the Peña Nieto administration is moving to invite foreign capitalists to invest in PEMEX, ultimately placing it in private hands. Many in the financial sector see in this explosion an excuse to speed up that process and move it further along.

On Friday, a *Financial Times* article by John Paul Rathbone indicated that this explosion could very well accelerate the process. "Pemex, the state oil company, has long been a byword in Mexico for inefficiency, corruption and union featherbedding ... Vested interests and the Mexican constitution have long thwarted previous reform attempts. But now Mr. Peña Nieto can

point to Pemex's decline in oil output *and* the awful explosion as evidence that the world's fourth largest oil company is falling behind the curve," wrote Rathbone.

Similarly, *The Economist* declared that this latest disaster and the Reynosa explosion "underlined the urgent need for better management at the company."

In its coverage, the *Wall Street Journal* quoted security expert Alberto Islas, who declared that the blast was evidence of a "systematic lack of oversight in contracts, that the company relies on for everything, including industrial security... This tells you that PEMEX needs to change."



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