Fertilizer plant explosion kills up to 20, wounds 160 in Texas

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A massive explosion at a fertilizer plant obliterated part of the town of West, Texas Wednesday evening. As many as 20 people have been killed, Mayor Tommy Muska estimated Thursday evening. Original estimates of the number of deaths were much higher, but a search of the blast site, according to the *Dallas Morning News*, "proved that many people escaped the explosion and fires."

The small farming community of 2,800 people near Waco, Texas and 80 miles south of Dallas, is in a state of shock. Texas Governor Rick Perry declared the town a disaster area and asked for federal assistance.

The cause of the explosion has yet to be determined. Waco police Sergeant William Swanton told the media in a press briefing Thursday morning that a fire that broke out in the West Fertilizer Company facility may have involved a railroad tanker full of anhydrous ammonia.

The fire broke out at around 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, drawing the attention of emergency crews and concerned residents, some of whom took video of the blaze. Twenty-four minutes after firefighters, police, and paramedics arrived and began evacuating the area, a large fireball engulfed the scene.

A witness quoted by the *Morning News* said the fireball erupted as firefighters trained their hoses on the blaze, suggesting the water had reacted with a large quantity of anhydrous ammonia.

West Fertilizer, like many companies across the US, has been cited for multiple safety violations, improper use of hazardous materials and similar practices—in this case, by state agencies. The company has never been seriously fined or held accountable. This tragedy is a further example of the lack of government oversight and regulation, which amounts to a license for corporations to injure and kill workers.

According to a safety plan filed with the federal government in 2011, the factory had no automatic shutoff system or firewalls. Lack of zoning in the town placed the dangerous chemical tanks less than 1,000 feet from schools, residential areas and a park.

The *Houston Chronicle* points out that the decades-old factory has never even been inspected by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration. A search of the database of the US Chemical Safety Board (CSB), the agency tasked with analyzing industrial accidents, turns up no investigation of any facility in West.

It is further worth noting that the Boston Marathon bombing, a tragedy that killed three people, has evoked hysteria on the part of the media, while the explosion in West, which was thought at one point to have killed as many as 70, has been downplayed.

The West, Texas blast ripped through a half-mile radius, flattening an entire neighborhood, including a nursing home and a middle school. At least 50 houses were destroyed, and a 50-unit apartment building had been reduced to a "skeleton standing up," local police said. The force of the explosion registered on the Richter scale at the equivalent of a 2.1 magnitude earthquake and, according to the US Geological Survey, was felt from as far away as Dallas.

Firefighters struggled until 11 p.m. Wednesday night to get the primary fire under control. Residents were told to stay indoors because leaking ammonia presented the risk of further explosions. The blast site remains too hot for investigators from the Chemical Safety Board and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms to enter.

Sgt. Swanton told reporters Thursday that three to five firefighters were still unaccounted for. Local Emergency Medical Service director George Smith said two paramedics were among the dead.

Survivors recounted being hit with a shockwave. Julie Zahirniako and her four-year-old son Anthony were playing on a school playground near the fertilizer plant when the fire broke out. When the explosion occurred, Zahirniako said Anthony was thrown four feet into the air. The boy's ribs were broken by the impact. "The fire was so high," she said. "It was just as loud as it could be. The ground and everything was shaking."

Derrick Hurtt and his 12-year-old daughter Khloey were sitting in a truck 300 yards away, taking video of the scene. At the moment of the blast, Khloey cried, "I can't hear

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anything… please get out of here, please get out of here." "I'm pretty sure it lifted the truck off the ground," Hurtt told NBC. "It just blew me over on top of her."

"The injuries that we are seeing are very serious," Hillcrest Baptist Medical Center CEO Glenn Robinson told reporters. "There are a number of patients that will be going to surgery." Of the 100 patients brought in Wednesday night, Robinson said at least 10 patients were in critical condition at the hospital. "It's a very unfortunate situation."

Another 65 patients were transported to Providence Health Center in Waco, where hospital authorities reported broken bones, lacerations, respiratory distress and other injuries. An unknown number of patients had been treated for injuries at a triage center set up at the high school football field.

ABC News reported as of early Thursday morning that 179 people were hospitalized, including 24 in critical condition and nine who suffered severe burns and had to be transferred to Parkland Hospital in Dallas.

President Barack Obama, in Boston to put in an appearance in the aftermath of the Marathon bombing, issued a brief written statement saying that "our prayers go out to the people of West." Mayor Muska, who is also a volunteer firefighter, reportedly did not receive the president's call. His home was among those leveled in the explosion.

Industrial accidents are appallingly common in the United States. As the *World Socialist Web Site* recently noted nearly 4 million workers are injured on the job each year—11,000 every day. In 2011, over 4,600 workers died from work-related injuries in the US—90 every week, or 13 each day. Corporations are allowed to preside over what can only be described as an "industrial slaughterhouse," with regulatory agencies either unable or unwilling to act.

Although a small company, West Fertilizer Company, owned by Adair Grain Inc., is no exception. In the past decade, the factory has been fined for safety violations and for operating without a permit.

In 2006, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality cited the plant for operating without a permit. The state agency investigated West Fertilizer after residents filed complaints about strong ammonia smells in the area. That year, the federal Environmental Protection Agency fined the plant $2,300 for failing to implement a risk management plan.

Last summer, the federal Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration found that the company intended to transport anhydrous ammonia without making or following a safety plan. Inspectors found ammonia tanks were not properly labeled. Federal regulators fined the company $10,000—a penalty negotiated down to $5,250 after the company said it would take "corrective actions."

The middle school near the facility has been evacuated multiple times due to fumes and pollution. According to an analysis by the *Houston Chronicle*, the company failed to report any "emission events" to state air pollution authorities after these incidents. Flanked by Texas Governor Rick Perry, the Commission on Environmental Quality's director, Zak Covar, told an Austin press conference Thursday that the plant had an "average compliance history score."

Covar insisted that since there had been no complaints since 2006, there was no need to inspect it. "Given the size of the facility and authorized emissions from the plant, generally those are inspected based on complaints," he said. The *Dallas Morning News* reviewed a report from West Fertilizer Company to the federal Environmental Protection Agency that the 54,000 pounds of anhydrous ammonia on hand presented no risk of fire or explosion. "The worst possible scenario," the report stated, "would be a 10-minute release of ammonia gas that would kill or injure no one."

A report by the Center for Public Integrity released on Wednesday morning, just hours before the West disaster, found that the number of investigations, case studies, and safety bulletins issued by the Chemical Safety Board has "fallen precipitously since 2006." The board has only 20 investigators.

Among the investigations the CSB has failed to conclude is a probe into the causes of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon explosion, which killed 11 workers and triggered the greatest environmental disaster in US history. An investigation into an April 2, 2010 explosion at the Tesoro Corporation's Washington oil refinery, which killed seven workers, likewise remains unresolved.

CSB chairman Rafael Moure-Eraso and director Daniel Horowitz said that the board received only $10.5 million annually and was stretched so thin that it was compelled to choose only 200 "high consequence" accidents to investigate each year. "We've made innumerable proposals over the years," Horowitz said, "pointing out the significant discrepancy between the number of serious accidents and the ones that we can handle from a practical standpoint.

"We've asked for a Houston office," he added. "We've asked for additional investigators for many years."

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