West, Texas residents survey explosion aftermath

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22 April 2013

On Saturday, some residents of the small farming town of West, Texas were allowed to return to the area destroyed by a massive explosion last Wednesday. A five-block blast site around the West Fertilizer Plant had been closed off since the disaster that killed 14 and injured 200 others.

On Friday, small fires broke out at the site of the explosion, fueled by leaking fertilizer tanks. The Texas Department of Public Safety and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), which are overseeing the disaster response, are removing the tanks as part of the investigation into the cause of the blast.

While officials have said the explosion was likely an accident, the site of the disaster is being treated like a crime scene. As of Saturday, 50 ATF agents were at the site to collect evidence. Journalists and residents have not been allowed near the center of the blast. The aftermath of the disaster has largely disappeared from the national news.

Authorities announced that only residents older than 18 years old who lived in the outer perimeter of the disaster zone could re-enter. The announcement came after growing frustration and complaints from those displaced over the lack of information and activity. Residents were told they could survey their homes but would only be allowed in between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m.

Residents were also told they must present proper identification to police before entering the area. Many survivors of the explosion were forced to flee their homes and did not have their IDs with them.

Those who attempted to enter the area earlier were ordered to stay out by state troopers, according to an Associated Press report. Ron Price, who was trying to assess his son's property said that when he and other residents were spotted by state police, they "came flying down the road" yelling at people. "It was pretty scary," he said. "Everybody just jumped and took off running. They jumped in their cars and we all started heading back."

Officials said those residents who were allowed into the outer blast zone would only be allowed two vehicles at each house, with no vehicles larger than a pickup truck. Police set up a checkpoint to register vehicles. Mayor Pro Tem Steve Vanek said in a press conference Saturday that anyone staying overnight was doing so "at your own risk." Vanek dismissed concerns about chemical contamination or other hazards. "It is safe, it is safe, it is safe for our citizens," he said. "Any rumors you have heard today, forget about it."

In the days since the explosion, details have emerged that indicate West Fertilizer Company operated without regard to safety laws, and state and federal regulatory agencies did not enforce rules or regularly inspect the factory.

A 2012 state health department filing revealed that the company had some 540,000 pounds of the explosive fertilizer ammonium nitrate in a storage building—1,350 times the amount that is the limit that triggers oversight by the Department of Homeland Security. This is now considered the likely cause of the enormous fireball that erupted half an hour after the initial fire engulfed the plant.

West Fertilizer Company issued a risk assessment in 2011 in which it disclosed to the Environmental Protection Agency that it had 54,000 pounds of anhydrous ammonia, but declared it 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."

The explosion has devastated West, a town of 2,800 people. Because of the lack of zoning enforcement, the

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62-year-old factory was surrounded by residential neighborhoods, schools, and parks. A nursing home and 50-unit apartment building were among those structures obliterated by the blast. Aerial photographs of the aftermath reveal a scene resembling the wreckage left by a heavy bomb.

Most of the victims who have been identified were emergency responders, a fact that compounded the difficulty of search and rescue operations in the immediate aftermath of the explosion. Two of West's three ambulances were destroyed, along with three of the town's five fire trucks.

Local reporting has included profiles of some of the victims. Among them were 10 volunteer firefighters: 41-year-old Morris Bridges, 37-year-old Perry Calvin, 26-year-old Jerry Chapman, 50-year-old Cody Dragoo, 52-year-old Kenny Harris, 52-year-old Jimmy Matus, 29-year-old Joey Pustejovsky, 29-year-old Cyrus Reed, and brothers Doug, 50, and Robert Snokhous, 48. Forty-five-year-old resident Buck Uptmor also rushed to the scene to help.

On Friday night, after delivering a statement on the events in Boston, President Obama issued an emergency declaration for West, authorizing Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to coordinate the recovery efforts. Texas Governor Rick Perry also declared the town a disaster area. According to a statement on the FEMA web site, the federal government will fund 75 percent of the response, though no damage estimate has been announced.

West survivors were sheltering with neighbors and relatives, relying largely on donations and charity. Nearly 1,500 volunteers had signed in at a donation site to help on Friday.

Many other newly homeless residents, according to the *Dallas Morning News*, were "crammed into a hotel" and were "tired of waiting" for information. "We need to get some straight answers," said one resident. "Don't leave us hanging."

Another resident told the paper she had not been allowed to return to her home to retrieve her son's medication. Mayor Pro Tem Vanek said that he would not answer questions, the *Morning News* reported, "until the ATF says he can."

Survivors expressed anger over the lack of safety enforcement and warnings about the danger the plant presented. Mandy Williams, who fled from her home barefoot along with her grandmother and 3-year-old son after the explosion, told the *Morning News*, "If I were a reporter and could ask one question to the mayor, and to Perry, and to all those people at the podium, it would be this: Do you have a siren in town that could alert us to a problem at the plant, instead of letting it be on fire and none of us know that an explosion could happen?"

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