

Memorial for West, Texas victims obscures causes of fertilizer plant explosion

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The small farming community of West, Texas remains crippled more than a week after an explosion at a fertilizer plant leveled part of town. The official death toll has risen to 15, although local news outlets have featured at least 16 profiles of the dead. More than 200 were injured.

The federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), the agency investigating the accident, continues to restrict public and media access to the blast site. The investigators have not yet reported what caused the initial fire to break out in the plant, or what chemicals were in the buildings on site. The explosion at West Fertilizer Company left a 10-foot-deep, 96-foot-wide crater. The 3-foot-thick concrete foundation of the facility was obliterated.

A memorial Thursday at Baylor University in nearby Waco drew thousands of residents and firefighters from around the country. The auditorium, with 9,300 seats, was filled to capacity. The ceremony was broadcast to crowds that overflowed neighboring tennis courts and baseball fields.

The event served to obscure the criminal negligence behind the tragedy and put the bulk of the costs of recovery on those who have been devastated. As in the aftermath of every disaster, the political establishment has sought to present itself as responsive and mournful in order to obscure the utter lack of oversight or recovery aid for victims.

Texas Governor Rick Perry commended the “courage” and “sacrifices of those who first responded.” The Republican governor, at pains to pledge aid to the devastated community, has emphasized the “volunteer” element of the tragedy and “community spirit” that will likewise characterize the rebuilding.

Baylor University President Ken Starr—the lawyer best known for his role in the impeachment proceedings against former President Bill Clinton—read out a statement of sympathy from George W. Bush. Senator John Cornyn praised the firefighters who “immediately ran toward the danger... looking for a way that they might help.” Cornyn mused, “How does one find such love to be willing to lay down their life, so that others might live?”

President Barack Obama arrived by helicopter to deliver a speech touching similarly on the “courage,” “resilience,” and “independence” of the people of West. The president, who had just come from the dedication of former President Bush’s library, offered “prayers” to those in attendance. Predictably, Obama invoked scripture repeatedly in his brief remarks. “The Book of Psalms tells us, ‘You, oh God, have tested us, have tried us. We went through fire, and through water. Yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance.’” Obama offered a potted round-up of recent disasters, including flooding to the north, the bombing of the Boston Marathon, explaining that it was “a trying week.”

“The call went out to volunteers ... it went out to folks who were tough enough and selfless enough to put in a full day’s work and still be ready for more. And together, you answered the call,” Obama said. “About 20 minutes after the call went out, the earth shook and the sky went dark, and West was changed forever.”

“You have been tested, West, you have been tried,” the president intoned. “But you have [been] and always will be surrounded by an abundance of love.” Gesturing to the line of flag-draped coffins representing the fallen emergency workers, Obama added, “You see it in the firefighters and first responders who are here.”

Nowhere in the memorial service was there even a mention of the fact that the West disaster was not the result of natural forces, but of an industrial accident at a facility that was operating in flagrant violation of basic safety laws.

Documents made public last week showed that Adair Grain, the company that owns West Fertilizer, stored some 540,000 pounds of the highly explosive compound ammonium nitrate in one storage building. This amount is 1,350 times the amount that would trigger oversight by the federal Department of Homeland Security. The company also stored 54,000 pounds of anhydrous ammonia at the plant.

Officials said Tuesday that many of the victims, 12 of whom were emergency responders, had been found within yards of the crater, suggesting they were near the center of

the blast. According to the *Dallas Morning News*, some of the emergency workers were found between the building where the blast occurred and a second structure, “of which only charred chunks of concrete and debris remain.”

Among the volunteer firefighters killed were Morris Bridges, 41; Jerry Chapman, 26; Cody Dragoo, 50; Kenny Harris, 52; Jimmy Matus, 52; Joey Pustejovsky, 29; and brothers Doug and Robert Snokhous, ages 50 and 48. Kevin Sanders, 33, a West emergency medical technician, was also killed.

Forty-five-year-old West resident Buck Uptmor, who rushed to the scene to assist, was also killed at the site of the blast. Other victims, including 37-year-old Perry Calvin of Navarro County and 29-year-old Cyrus Reed of Abbott, were in town for an emergency medical technician training event. Calvin and Reed both responded to the call for volunteer assistance in battling the blaze at the plant. Witnesses said Calvin was holding a hose at the time of the explosion and insisted on standing firm so others could evacuate.

West residents Mariano Saldivar, 57, and 65-year-old Judy Monroe were killed when the 50-unit apartment building near the fertilizer plant was hit by the blast.

Adolph Lander, a wheelchair-bound 96-year-old, was among residents evacuated from the West Rest Haven nursing home near the plant. Lander’s daughter said he suffered broken bones in the disaster, and was taken first to a triage center set up on the school football field, then to a community center, where he died. Another nursing home resident, 87-year-old Tony Lenart, also died after being evacuated.

The history of violations on the part of Adair Grain suggests that a disaster was inevitable. The facility had no sprinkler systems or fire barriers. None of the buildings had warnings posted of what was inside. The town had no alarm system to warn residents in nearby neighborhoods of the risk of explosions.

Repeated complaints of strong ammonia smells—in some cases necessitating the evacuation of a nearby middle school—prompted the federal Environmental Protection Agency to investigate in 2006. The EPA fined West Fertilizer Company \$2,300 for failing to implement a risk management plan. The company never shared an emergency plan with local officials or emergency responders.

This state of affairs led directly to the deaths of the volunteer firefighters, who had no way of knowing what they were walking into. Residents were likewise unaware of the hazards they lived in the shadow of.

Texas Assistant State Fire Marshal Kelly Kistner insisted at a news conference Tuesday that the West disaster was “an act of God,” whose causes may never be determined.

The state of Texas has no internal occupational safety program, relying instead on the fatally understaffed federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Not surprisingly, Texas has one of the highest occupational fatality rates in the country, 14 percent above the national average. Texas also has a voluntary workers compensation system that leaves injured workers without insurance.

The *Dallas Morning News* reported an unusually tight-lipped handling of information about the victims. After repeated requests to the office of local Justice of the Peace David Pareya for an official list of the dead, the paper was rebuffed again on Wednesday. Pareya “declined through staffers to release a single name of those killed in the blast, including victims whose funerals have already been held. His office will not explain why Pareya is withholding the information.” The paper added that, “The Dallas medical examiner, where at least some of the bodies were taken, declined to comment.”

Initial damage estimates by the Insurance Council of Texas place the cost of the destruction at \$100 million. Some 180 families, mainly uninsured, have sought out housing assistance with the Red Cross.

As many as 140 homes were heavily damaged or destroyed. In all, about 350 homes in a 37-block area next to the plant sustained some damage. According to Mayor Pro Tem Steve Vanek, about half of the homes within that zone are uninhabitable.

“Water under the bridge,” Vanek said of the lack of zoning in the town that led to development of residential neighborhoods around the 62-year-old factory. “It was their call to move to that area.”



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