

Twenty-four dead in Mexican truck explosion

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In the early morning hours of May 7, a semi-truck pulling two tank trailers in tandem loaded with pressurized liquid petroleum gas (LP) crashed in Mexico in the community of San Pedro Xalostoc, a subdivision of the municipality of Ecatepec, north of Mexico City. Two violent explosions shook the ground and released shrapnel over a perimeter of more than 300 meters. Forty homes were damaged and 30 cars destroyed. The accident happened along the Mexico City-Pachuca highway.

At last count, 24 had died and 36 were burned; 12 are still hospitalized, three with burns covering 90 percent of their bodies. All the blame is being placed on the trailer truck's operator, Juan Olivares. He is accused of reckless driving.

Whatever Olivares' role, the underlying cause of this tragedy is the subordination of the health and safety of the citizenry to the profits of energy and trucking companies.

The accident occurred when both trailers became separated from the truck and careened into traffic, hitting other cars and homes and exploding. The first explosion resulted in 15 deaths. The second trailer also exploded, killing four. Together, both tankers carried 40,000 liters of the liquid gas. Adding fuel to the conflagration, at least two propane tanks installed in homes also exploded.

The area where the accident occurred is surrounded by homes inhabited by workers and small entrepreneurs, which are perilously close to this highway as a result of a recent highway-widening project. When the accident took place at 5:30 a.m., most of the inhabitants were still inside their homes. On Wednesday, area residents organized a wake for 14 of the dead, including nine who never had a chance to make it out of their homes and burned to death. Among the dead are 10 children.

By the time Mexico State firefighters and Red Cross

personnel reached the scene, neighbors were attempting to put out fires with a bucket brigade.

The explosion shook the whole area, witnesses likening it to an earthquake. It was also reminiscent of the industrial holocaust of the San Juanico explosion of November 19, 1984. In fact, the roots of the disaster of May 7 lie in that event of 29 years ago, when six massive spherical tanks exploded at the San Juanico LP gas depository and wiped out an entire community. Estimates are that at least 700 residents died and thousands more were injured. No official tally has ever been released. The working class subdivision of San Juan Ixhuatepec was obliterated, as well as parts of Ecatepec, a short distance south of San Pedro Xalostoc.

As a result of the disaster, the government of President Miguel de la Madrid issued a decree in 1986 ordering the removal of the tank farm from the town and prohibited establishing LP facilities in urban areas. A planned gas pipeline project was canceled.

The decree was never implemented. The San Juanico LP tank farm was never fully closed and continues to operate; LP tank farms continue to exist in urban areas. LP gas is transported on surface roads by a fleet of semi-trucks pulling double tank trailers. These trucks crisscross Ecatepec 24 hours a day, seven days a week to supply the entire region.

The entire operation is in the hands of profit-driven corporations—Monterrey-based Termogas in this case—with no concern for basic work safety measures and the security of the people living along the truck routes.

Termogas owns 22 depots with a storage capacity of 4 million liters of LP and 180 trucks to transport the fuel. The company claims to have followed all the safety measures that the law required and assured the public that it is properly insured.

Recardeo Arias Jimenez, the manager of the Mexican Association of Insurance Companies (AMIS), backed

up a statement by Termogas. Pointing out that there were 23,000 traffic accidents, with 18,000 to 19,000 deaths annually in Mexico, and that traffic accidents are frequent on federal highways, Arias emphasized that the purpose of insurance is not to prevent accidents but to protect trucking firms from civil liability. Termogas and other companies use part of their profits to pay insurance premiums in order to avoid the more costly safety measures that could prevent such fatal catastrophes.

The Madrid daily *El País* reported that a proposal to prohibit trucks with two trailers on Mexican highways and those that weigh over 32 tons is languishing in the legislature and would not be approved until the end of this year, if at all.

El País also recounts warnings by the Mexican Transportation Institute (Instituto Mexicano del Transporte, IMT) in a study of the high risks of the movement of hazardous materials by truck. That study revealed that in the period from 2006 to 2009, there were 1,199 collisions that involved trucks hauling hazardous materials, leaving 196 dead and 838 injured.

IMT official Jesús Chavarría indicated that changing the law or tightening regulations is very difficult because it conflicts with profit motives, particularly when it comes to imposing weight limits on trucking companies.

There have been other recent fatal gas explosions, not all of them related to trucking: Last September, a gas plant near the Mexico-US border exploded, killing 30 workers. On January 31, 37 were killed and 120 wounded at a gas explosion in the headquarters of PEMEX, the national oil company, in Mexico City.

A year ago in April, another trailer became disconnected in Veracruz, killing 43 farm workers riding in a bus.

Currently Mexican law allows trucks with double trailers—a tractor pulling two trailers—with a maximum length of 30 meters (100 feet) and a maximum weight of 80 tons (twice the US weight limit.) Mexican tanker trucks operating along the highway where the latest disaster took place have been observed exceeding legal weight and speed limits.

The recent accident also exposes a common condition among Mexico's poor: precariously built homes in the vicinity of roads and other hazards.

Many of the residents of Ecatepec and other Mexico

City suburbs in this densely populated area are refugees of the September 1985 Mexico City earthquake who built unsafe homes from cinder blocks on whatever land was accessible to them at the time, once it became clear that government promises of adequate financial help would not materialize. At Ecatepec, they joined thousands who had been displaced by the San Juanico explosion.

While it is not uncommon for poor people in Mexico and Latin America in need of places to live to set up precarious homes alongside roads and railroad tracks, in this case the highway itself was widened, removing any possible buffer between the neighborhood and the road. As is typical, government inspectors looked the other way and safety concerns were brushed aside, as municipal and federal authorities absolved themselves from the responsibility of providing decent housing for Mexican workers and the poor.

Mexico State Governor Eruviel Avila Villegas has promised federal and state government help, up to 120,000 pesos—about 10,000 US dollars—for families of the dead, smaller sums for injured families and for those whose homes were destroyed. This sum will hardly cover the cost of providing decent and safe housing for the victims. He has also promised to pay for funerals and burial costs.

An AP report quoted Maribel Juarez, who lost her cousin and cousin in law, together with their two children, and two grandchildren, about the proximity of homes to the road. She denounced the recent highway widening. "That was an easy thing for them to do," she said. "They never considered these tragedies, or our families"

She added, "The government now offers caskets and burial sites; that will not bring back our family."



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