

Deadly chemical plant explosion in Louisiana

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14 June 2013

An explosion and fire Thursday morning at a chemical plant in Geismar, Louisiana, has killed at least one person and injured at least 73 others. As of Thursday afternoon, 26 people had been rushed to three different hospitals in the area. At least two of the wounded are listed in critical condition as of this writing. Authorities ordered people within a two mile radius to stay indoors in part because of toxic smoke.

The blast at 8:37 a.m. local time sent a huge fireball and a column of smoke into the sky above the Mississippi River just south of Baton Rouge. The explosion occurred at the William Olefins chemical plant, which sits 60 miles upriver from New Orleans. The factory produces approximately 1.3 billion pounds of ethylene and 90 million pounds of polymer grade propylene, both of which are used in the petrochemical process to make plastics.

The fire, fueled by the flammable propylene, burned on for five hours after the blast. Louisiana State Police Captain Doug Cain told reporters that the persistence of the blaze was “good in the sense that it is burning itself off, so there’s no impact outside the fence line of the facility.”

One gets the sense that the tragedy could have been even larger in scale. Three hundred employees were evacuated from the plant. According to the company, all employees have been accounted for, including 10 who stayed behind in a safe room within the plant. Emergency shut-off valves have been closed and the unit in question has been isolated.

The petrochemical industry is particularly prone to occasional fires and explosions due to the use of massive equipment operating under intense pressure and high heat. However, most of these outbreaks, which are brought under control fairly quickly and with little injury or damage, do not make news headlines. Southern Louisiana is home to a large share of the country’s petrochemical facilities and has seen at least

two other blasts in the past two years alone.

Louisiana has a high industrial accident rate. Federal data on fatal injuries from 2011 recorded 111 workplace deaths. The state registered 44,900 injuries on the job in the span of the year. A report issued in December by the Louisiana Bucket Brigade, an environmental health organization, found that over the course of that year the state’s 17 oil refineries reported 301 accidents. The data, which came from industry self-reporting, likely understates the actual accident rate.



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