

# At least three dead in Manhattan explosion blamed on gas leak

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Three people are confirmed dead and nearly 70 injured after a massive explosion in the East Harlem section of Manhattan on Wednesday morning. Two adjoining five-story apartment buildings at the corner of 116th Street and Park Avenue collapsed into rubble within seconds, and fires raged for hours afterward.

As of Wednesday evening, ten people were still reported missing. The buildings contained a total of 15 apartments, along with a street-level piano store and church.

Two-hundred-and-fifty firefighters were called to fight the five-alarm blaze. By late afternoon firefighters were still searching through the rubble for survivors.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio held a news conference at the scene of the disaster and confirmed that the cause was a gas leak. According to de Blasio, energy company Consolidated Edison received a phone call from a customer at 9:13 am about a heavy gas odor. Repair crews were dispatched but did not arrive until just after the explosion 18 minutes later.

Immediately seeking to downplay any suggestion of blame and responsibility, de Blasio said, "This is a tragedy of the worst kind because there was no indication in time to save people." Some residents of the area, however, said that they had complained about gas odors for the last few weeks.

The sound of the explosion could be heard as far as one mile away. The force was such that some people went flying out of windows. Witnesses reported that they were thrown into the air while they sat in their apartments a block away, or were awakened by what they thought could be an earthquake. People were trapped in their cars and nearby apartments, and cars were buried in rubble.

A southbound commuter train was passing on its way to the Grand Central Terminal just as the explosion

took place, and commuters said the train shook violently. If the train had passed only seconds earlier, the toll in injuries and possibly deaths could have been much higher.

The WSWs spoke to several residents of the area. Darnella Mason was with her brother and mother, waiting for news on where they would stay in the coming days. They live in an adjacent building that was damaged by the explosion. Darnella was injured by flying glass and again during the hasty evacuation of her building. "It was a panic situation," she said. "Everyone was running down the stairs, shoving and throwing clothes, everything."

"What are we supposed to do now? We're going to try to contact the Red Cross. Maybe they're going to put us in a shelter or something."

Darnella said that she and her family were told the Red Cross might be there to help. However, after hours of waiting, there was still no help or news of future aid.

Kaucher Bauyan, who lives across the street, was startled awake by the explosion. "I heard a bang, and there was a lot of smoke. My building was shaking. I thought my building had been bombed. I knew that beneath the piano store, in the basement, there was the smell of gas."

Bauyan added that she thinks the "maintenance of the building [that collapsed] wasn't good."

There have been several recent warnings about the state of New York City's infrastructure. Just this week, the Center for an Urban Future released a report on infrastructure problems in the largest city in the US. One thousand miles of the city's water mains are more than 100 years old, 47 of the city's bridges are structurally deficient, and 6,300 miles of the city's gas mains are more than 56 years old.

According to the report, “Over half of [New York City’s] gas mains were installed before 1960 and are made of unprotected cast iron, a corrosion prone material...

“Con Edison and National Grid each manage one of the oldest gas distribution networks in the country,” it added. “Con Edison’s 2,234 miles of gas mains serve 833,000 customers in the Bronx, Manhattan and northern Queens. Their mains are 53 years old on average and 60 percent are composed of unprotected steel or cast iron, the most leak-prone material. According to the federal Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, Con Edison experienced 83 leaks for every 100 miles of main in 2012. Corrosion was responsible for a total of 427 of these leaks.”

Con Edison, the giant private utility, issued a statement later on Wednesday claiming that it had conducted an inspection of the area where the explosion took place several months ago. The National Transportation Safety Board, among other government agencies, will be looking into the causes of Wednesday’s explosion.



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