New York City gas explosion likely caused by 127-year-old pipes

Gabriel Black
14 March 2014

Rescue efforts are still underway to find several people who may have perished in the explosion that destroyed two adjoining buildings in the East Harlem neighborhood of Manhattan on Wednesday.

The buildings collapsed after a suspected gas leak buildup in the basement. The blast, which shattered glass throughout the block, injured more than 60 people and could be heard up to a mile away. One woman is in critical condition with a severe head injury, after she was struck and pinned underneath the rubble. A critically injured 15-year-old boy has severe burns and broken bones.

This latest tragedy, which has claimed at least eight lives, is only one of a series of building collapses in the past five years. In the immediate aftermath of the explosion, numerous warnings have surfaced pointing to the growing deterioration of New York City's infrastructure.

The gas line that served the two collapsed buildings was built out of cast iron in 1887. According to a report in *Time Magazine*, this 127-year-old line was the likely cause of the tragedy.

Dilapidated and outdated infrastructure is an ever-present reality in this wealthy metropolis. According to the *New York Daily News*, the March 12 incident is the latest of ten building collapses since 2008 in East Harlem and Harlem.

In 2012 a five-story building on 123rd street collapsed. Office buildings in Harlem are an average of 69 years old. A spokesman for the Harlem Chamber of Commerce said, "Many of these buildings are massive accidents waiting to happen." Fifteen people have been injured and one killed in these incidents.

Last year, in New York City, an explosion injured twelve in Chinatown during an insecticide operation. In 2008 a manhole blast killed a worker in Brooklyn. The year before, a Harlem gas explosion injured 20 and, in a separate incident, an underground steam pipe explosion tore through a Manhattan street, swallowing up a tow truck, killing one and injuring 45.

On Tuesday of this week, a prescient report by the Center for an Urban Future (CUF) warned of "havoc" if the city's outdated infrastructure is not rapidly modernized. It estimated the minimum cost of fixing the inadequate, broken, and dangerous parts of NYC's infrastructure to be $47.3 billion.

The report notes, for instance, that there were 403 water main breaks in 2013 alone, with the city's system taking in 24 percent less water than it delivers due to leaks. In the last year, major water main breaks have severely disrupted the subways on two occasions.

Forty seven city bridges are in a state of disrepair. Seven hundred twenty-eight miles of subway signals are 50 years beyond their expected life span. Harlem, the site of Wednesday's disaster, topped the list as having the worst roads in all of New York City. Jonathan Bowles, executive director of the CUF, stated that the reason was neglect driven by lack of funding.

According to the CUF, 60 percent of the city's Con Edison gas mains are "made of unprotected steel or cast iron, an outmoded and leak-prone material." The company controls the majority of the city's gas, and operated the cast-iron pipes that brought gas to the two collapsed Harlem buildings.

Before the incident, residents had been complaining about unpleasant gas smells. The Associated Press reports that fire officials were called about the smell a week before the explosion and that a resident on the top floor had to open the roof door to get rid of it.

A tenant, Ruben Borrero, told the Associated Press that he had complained to the landlord about the smell the day before the explosion. "You walk in the front

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door and you want to turn around and walk directly out" he said. Con Edison claimed that it had only received a complaint of a gas leak fifteen minutes before the explosion.

The death and destruction that occurred Wednesday in New York City are a direct product of the vast growth of inequality in the US' largest metropolis. Even as its infrastructure has been left to rot, the city's wealthiest have amassed great fortunes.

New York City has the highest level of income inequality of any large city in the country. In 2010, the top one percent of earners took in a median income of $716,625 a year, whereas the bottom 20 percent made just $14,168. New York City currently has the sixth highest poverty rate of the US' 20 biggest cities, up from the thirteenth highest just ten years ago. Former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg is alone worth $33 billion.

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