

Gas explosion at Florida jail kills two, injures 184

Our reporter
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A gas line explosion late Wednesday night at the Escambia County Central Booking and Detention Center near Pensacola, Florida, took the lives of two inmates and injured 184 others at the jail. As of Thursday afternoon one of the victim's bodies had been recovered while a second had not yet been dug out because of fear of a further collapse of the partially destroyed building.

According to the *Pensacola News Journal*, the blast, which occurred around 11:00 p.m., rattled houses up to three miles away and forced county officials to evacuate some 600 prisoners. The explosion is believed to have originated in a rear laundry room on the first floor, according to officials, who said the two fatalities were found in the same area.

"The explosion shook us so hard it was like we were in an earthquake," Monique Barnes, an inmate who said she was knocked off her fourth-floor bunk, told the Associated Press by phone. "It was like a movie, a horrible, horrible movie."

About 600 inmates—200 men and 400 women—were in the building at the time of the explosion, authorities reported. Barnes said that during the evacuation hundreds of inmates and corrections officers had to use one stairwell, "everyone pushing and bleeding."

Barnes, who spoke to AP after she was taken to another jail, said she and other inmates complained of smelling gas ahead of the blast, and some reported headaches. The jail was reportedly running on generator power after record rainfalls and severe flooding in the Pensacola area knocked out power. Barnes said the toilets weren't working, so inmates had to use plastic trash bags.

The basement of the facility flooded during Wednesday's rains and a retention wall had collapsed from water damage before the explosion, according to Escambia County Sheriff David Morgan.

At a Thursday afternoon press conference Sheriff Morgan said there would be an investigation into

allegations that inmates and corrections officers reported smelling gas in the jail as many as 24 hours before the explosion, the *News Journal* reported. Escambia County spokesman Bill Pearson claimed there were no documented complaints or service calls regarding a gas leak in the day leading up to the blast.

As word of the devastating blast spread, relatives rushed down to the jail after midnight to get information about the fate of family members. Authorities blocked off roads leading to the detention center and relatives and attorneys for the inmates were forced to stand behind police tape.

Anger grew as relatives were met with bureaucratic indifference by authorities preoccupied with shifting prisoners to other jails, securing them in hospitals and tracking down inmates who were not accounted for. Family members were told to wait at a local restaurant until they were given information, then to call various phone numbers and check a web site for updates.

Speaking of the relatives, the *News Journal* wrote, "More than 100 of them gathered in the wee hours Thursday at the Piccadilly restaurant at Towne and Country Plaza, where law enforcement and other officials told them a news conference was to take place. But emotions ran high as people's questions went unanswered.

"I've been here for three hours," said Lawrence Black, who was waiting to hear if his son, Ashton, an inmate at the jail, was OK. "This is terrible. I don't know how to feel right now. And I'm just wondering why they're being so secretive."

Standing behind the police tape, defense attorney Gene Mitchell told the AP, "I have over 20 clients in there. I've had dozens of calls. Every other call is a family member wanting to know what has happened to a loved one."

At about 2 a.m. Thursday, the newspaper reported, Escambia County Sheriff's deputy Delarian Wiggins made an announcement with a loudspeaker from his SUV

that all inmates who were injured were being treated in hospitals and other inmates had been transferred to facilities in Escambia and Santa Rosa counties.

“With people wondering whether their loved ones were dead or alive, Wiggins’ information didn’t appease the crowd,” the *News Journal* wrote. “People swarmed his vehicle, demanding more information. ‘You’re not giving us no information,’ one woman yelled. ‘What are we supposed to do? That’s why we’re here. ... We already know people are hurt and dead.’”

Family members demanded to know the names of the dead inmates and why authorities had not moved the prisoners to safer areas after they reported smelling gas and getting sick hours before the explosion.

Sheila Travis interrupted a Thursday afternoon press conference with Sheriff Morgan saying she had repeatedly called hospitals and could not get any information about her son. “Good or bad, our children have souls, they have families that love them,” she shouted.

The sheriff dodged her question, telling her that Escambia County had taken over the jail last year and that she would have to direct her questions to them.

The county reportedly took over the jail and its 400 employees from the sheriff’s office October 1 after a five-year federal investigation of the facility. According to the *Pensacola News Journal*, the US Department of Justice probe that was concluded last May had determined that “inadequate management of the jail led to routine violations of inmates’ constitutional rights.”

These included “a low number of guards watching over many inmates, which contributed to ‘appalling’ levels of violence, ‘clearly inadequate’ mental health care and a recently discontinued practice of segregating inmates according to race. Sheriff David Morgan, who was then-manager of the jail, told investigators in April he had put an end to that decades-long practice.”



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