

Dozens hurt and two missing after gas explosion and fire level buildings in Manhattan

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For the second time in a little more than a year, a massive explosion apparently caused by a gas leak has led to building collapses and massive injuries in the New York City borough of Manhattan.

On March 12, 2014, two buildings in East Harlem collapsed after an explosion at 9:30 a.m. Eight people were killed and dozens were injured.

This time the disaster took place in an even busier residential and commercial area, in the East Village downtown neighborhood. Building damage was even more severe, though apparently with less loss of life. As of Friday two people were still reported missing and 25 injuries were reported, including four firefighters and four critically hurt. Three buildings had completely collapsed and a fourth was still threatened.

The explosion, at about 3:15 p.m. on Thursday afternoon, was quickly followed by a massive fire, with flames shooting out of the building on Second Avenue, near the corner of East 7th Street. New York University is nearby, and only a block away is the Cooper Union, the arts and sciences college founded more than 150 years ago, where Abraham Lincoln gave the famous speech that launched his campaign for the presidential nomination in 1860.

Up to 250 firefighters responded to the seven-alarm blaze, many of them working through the night. The fire was so intense that rescuers could not enter the buildings affected for some time. The smoke was visible at least two miles away. Within a short time two five-story buildings had collapsed, and a third followed later that night. A fourth building was still deemed threatened as of Friday morning.

The disaster began suddenly, with a strong gas odor in the first-floor Sushi Park storefront restaurant at 121

Second Avenue, where a number of customers were enjoying a late lunch.

With little warning and before evacuation could take place, the massive blast shook the neighborhood, jolting hundreds of residents in buildings nearby. Patrons staggered out of the restaurant, some bloodied, and a number collapsed on the street. Passersby were hit by flying glass. At least a dozen residents of the building escaped before the fire started minutes later. Other residents of the area participated in dramatic rescues, including one by a building fire escape in the minutes before the massive blaze would have made it impossible.

Most of those who suffered serious injuries came from the restaurant. The missing at this point include a busboy at the restaurant and Nicholas Figueroa, 23, who was having lunch with a friend. Nicholas's 19-year-old brother, Tyler, as well as his father, searched for hours at nearby hospitals and other locations. "We just hope my brother comes back," Tyler told a local television news station.

The most seriously injured suffered from respiratory burns rather than smoke inhalation. In these cases hot gases or burning particles have seriously damaged respiratory tissue, including the lungs. As the fire continued and the smoke condition worsened and persisted, residents of the area, especially those suffering from respiratory or heart conditions, were warned to keep their windows closed until further notice.

The giant private utility Con Edison had been on the property just an hour before, checking on the installation of new gas meters, and had withheld approval because there was not enough room for them

in the basement area. A contractor who said he had completed plumbing work on the site about six months ago was also there for an inspection, and was seriously injured when the explosion took place just as he opened the door to the basement.

There was some suggestion in early reports that the work of the contractor might have been a factor in this disaster. Whether or not that is the case, the explosion and fire are another illustration of the dangers of New York City's aging and dangerously deficient infrastructure. The latest building collapses follow a series of such incidents in recent years. The Center for an Urban Future issued a report just before the 2014 Harlem disaster warning of the dangers posed by the city's inadequate and aging water mains, gas mains, bridges and other infrastructure.

While government officials claim there is no money to deal with issues that pose imminent dangers to the lives of ordinary New Yorkers, the massive ultra-luxury building boom continues. Not far from the latest explosion stand high-rise buildings with multimillion-dollar amenities and apartments that are selling for millions and in some cases tens of millions of dollars.

Myron, a 60-year-old lifelong area resident, spoke with the WSWs at the scene of the explosion. "These buildings were built in 1910. Look at all the wood they used in them," he said, gesturing towards the pile of debris. "The landlords are getting filthy rich with the rents they charge but the apartments have not been improved much in a century."

More than 90 residents displaced by the fire sought help from Red Cross for temporary housing. Steve, who lives in an adjacent building, stayed overnight in a YMCA with the help of the aid organization. "The City OEM [Office of Emergency Management] in that trailer over there has been unable to tell me when I can go home," he said. "My computer is there and if I lost my computer I lost my life. I'm a reclusive writer. I have nowhere to turn."



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