

# Gas explosion at Maryland apartment complex kills two, injures dozens

**Brad Dixon****13 August 2016**

Wednesday evening an explosion ripped through an apartment complex in Silver Spring, Maryland. The blast and subsequent fire left two dead and injured more than 30. As many as 24 apartment units were completely destroyed.

While the cause of the blast is still under investigation, officials believe that it was likely due to a natural gas leak.

The explosion, which residents compared to an earthquake, was so powerful that it could be felt almost two miles away. The site of the explosion resembled a bomb blast. Clothes and personal effects were strewn among the trees and streets surrounding the apartment complex.

“The number of households impacted is significant,” Paul Carden, the regional disaster officer for the Red Cross told local media. “And the impact is more emotional because it was an explosion. I was at the scene and there’s someone’s shoe here, someone’s sock there and someone’s papers over there.”

Gustavo Zuniga and his wife were asleep when the explosion took out the floor beneath their bed causing it to fall down two stories. His wife clawed through debris to rescue her unconscious husband who was treated at MedStar Washington Hospital Center for second-degree burns on his feet and cuts to his head.

“People were dropping children and jumping out of other windows,” said Montgomery County Fire Chief Scott Goldstein at an early morning briefing on Thursday.

Injuries ranged from respiratory problems from smoke inhalation, to burns and bone fractures from jumping out of windows.

On Thursday morning cadaver dogs discovered two dead bodies among the rubble.

Around 120 firefighters and EMS workers responded

to the explosion and fire. A temporary shelter was set up in the gymnasium of the nearby Long Branch Recreation Center, which currently houses around 60 to 70 residents who lost their homes to the fire. According to Montgomery County Police Assistant Chief Russ Hamill, around 100 people have been displaced.

Residents of the apartment complex consisted predominantly of low-income, working class immigrants from Central America and Africa.

Many of those who survived the explosion have lost all of their possessions. After being treated at the hospital for cuts and burns, Armindo Benitez returned to the apartment complex. “But it was all gone,” he told the *Washington Post*. “I have no ID. I can’t get money out of the bank, and my car is blocked in.”

Helder Lopez, who lived in his apartment with six other family members, lost his car keys, wallet and sensitive documents. The entire family lost their clothes. “I don’t know what we are going to do,” he told the *Post*.

“When I ask them their address and I hear the address that is completely demolished, I have to break the news to them that [they] may not have any belongings to salvage whatsoever,” said Chuck Crisostomo, operations chief of Montgomery County Emergency Management and Homeland Security.

The *Post* reports that authorities suspect a natural gas leak caused the massive explosion. This was “the working proposition,” said Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett. However Montgomery County Battalion Chief Steve Mann said it could be “weeks” before officials determine the cause of the explosion and fire.

A resident who spoke to the *Post* said that a neighbor taking out his trash smelled gas and could hear the hissing moments before the explosion.

Washington Gas Light Company, which distributes natural gas to more than 1 million customers in Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia, says it is cooperating with authorities. The private utility holds a monopoly on natural gas in the area.

At a press conference, Leggett noted that officials had received a call on the evening of July 25 reporting the smell of gas at the apartment complex. Emergency personnel could not verify the smell of gas and left the scene 12 minutes after their arrival. Officials say it is unclear if this incident was related to the explosion.

Renato Mendoza, an organizer with CASA de Maryland, says that he has helped residents in the past file complaints with the county over rodents and other pests in the apartment complex.

“The apartments are old and they require extra maintenance,” he told the *Post*. The landlord, Kay Apartment Communities, “was notorious for not providing the most adequate maintenance.”

The decaying social infrastructure in the United States increases the likelihood of these types of tragedies. Furthermore, the profit motive of privately held utilities gives few incentives for investing in upgrading pipes and other critical infrastructure.

The explosion in Maryland follows a number of other similar incidents across the country.

A gas explosion at a jail in Pensacola, Florida in April 2014 killed two inmates and injured 184 others. In March 2013, a gas explosion in a Detroit suburb killed a retired autoworker. A natural gas explosion in January 2011 in Philadelphia killed a utility worker. In December 2010, a gas explosion leveled a furniture store in a Detroit suburb killing two employees and injuring several others. Seven people died in September 2010 when a PG&E gas line exploded in the suburbs of San Francisco.

Last year, the largest natural gas leak in US history—lasting from October 2015 to February 2016 and releasing an estimated 97,100 metric tons of methane into the atmosphere—took place at the SoCalGas Aliso Canyon underground storage facility as a result of antiquated infrastructure and inadequate maintenance and inspection.

While the US ruling class can find endless resources to prop up the financial sector and support the ongoing wars abroad, when it comes to funding basic social infrastructure—such as upgrading aging bridges and gas

pipelines, or pipes that leak lead into drinking water—there is always “no money.”



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