

Massive explosion kills 31, injures scores at fireworks market in Mexico

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At least 31 people have been confirmed dead from a massive chain-reaction explosion which tore through the San Pablito Market, one of the largest fireworks markets in the country, in Tultepec, Mexico on Tuesday. The town lies just north of the capital and is considered part of Greater Mexico City.

The explosions, which took place in an area containing over 300 tons of fireworks, left the bodies of the dead so badly burned that neither their ages nor genders could be determined on site. Among the few bodies which have been identified so far are seven adolescent boys, a three-month old baby, and a 12-year-old girl.

In addition to the dead, over 70 people were injured in the explosions, including three children whose injuries are so severe they have been sent to Galveston, Texas for specialized treatment. Some of the injured were admitted to the hospital with severe burns covering as much as 90 percent of their bodies. As of this writing, 47 people remained hospitalized, among them 10 children.

The market was especially well stocked with fireworks at the time of the incident due to the high demand around the holidays. The market, which regularly holds over 300 vendors, was expected to sell 100 tons of fireworks by the end of its season, which lasts from August through December. More than 80 percent of the 300 stalls at the market were destroyed by the explosions, according to state officials.

In addition to this immense loss of life, the tragedy also spells a serious crisis for the surrounding area. The San Pablito Market was a vital part of the local economy, sustaining a large portion of the region's population. With its destruction, more than three-quarters of the town's residents, who are in some way involved in the pyrotechnic industry, will be affected.

One source estimated that sales from this market provided sustenance to over 40,000 families.

While the immediate cause of the explosion is still unknown, the head of Tultepec emergency services, Isidro Sanchez, has speculated that a lack of safety measures was the likely cause of the blasts.

If the cause is proven to be the result of poor regulation, the tragedy will represent one more major scandal for the Mexican government. The market was inspected by safety officials only one month prior to the incident, and no irregularities were reported. In fact, San Pablito Market was described by the head of the local pyrotechnics association to the online publication *Animal Político* just last week as one of the safest markets in all of Latin America with stalls having "sufficient space so that there is not a chain reaction in case of a spark."

While this explosion is among the worst fireworks tragedies in the country's history, it is not the first. Mexico has experienced many deadly explosions caused by poorly controlled and often illegal fireworks markets over the last few decades. A 1988 blast in Mexico city's La Merced market killed 68; In 1999 an explosion of illegally stored fireworks left 63 people dead; and in 2002, 29 were killed at a market in Veracruz.

The San Pablito Market itself has had at least two other explosions over the last decade alone. After a series of near deadly incidents, more safety precautions were added to the market including provisions that all structures must be built of brick and concrete and fireworks had to be kept beneath glass out of reach of customers. Firefighters were also stationed on site.

Despite these measures being officially in place, some employees reported to the Mexican daily *La Jornada* that there had been frequent violations.

Among those reported were things such as neglect of a 15 meters distance between the premises and the parking lot.

The newspaper also quoted workers at the market saying that merchants had overstocked and improperly stored fireworks. According to these accounts, a bundle of rockets known as “brujitas” toppled over and ignited from friction with the pavement, setting off the disastrous chain reaction. Whether or not this was the cause is still to be determined.

The most devastating feature of such frequent tragedies like the one in Tultepec, Mexico is how easily they could have been prevented. Poor regulation of such a volatile industry, the lack of advanced safety resources and the fact that there is an entire region of a country racked by immense poverty and forced to rely on fireworks sales as a means of survival, are all the result of a dysfunctional socio-economic system which fails to protect, sustain, and least of all fulfill, its population.



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