

# At least 77 dead and dozens injured after gas tanker explodes in Haiti's second largest city

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A fuel tanker exploded in Haiti's second largest city early Tuesday morning after overturning in the neighborhood of La Fossette, letting loose a massive fireball that has resulted in at least 75 deaths and dozens of injuries, according to local authorities.

The explosion took place in the northern city of Cap-Haitien when a tanker transporting gasoline crossed into the Semarie district at the eastern entrance of the city. After crossing a bridge into La Fossette, the driver lost control of the tanker while trying to avoid hitting a motorcycle taxi, causing the truck to flip over and erupt in flames. Hours after the blast, surrounding buildings and overturned vehicles were engulfed in the blaze as firefighters desperately tried to put out the fire and find survivors.

Most of the deaths happened as a result of passers-by rushing to the tanker moments after it tumbled over to collect the escaping fuel, a rare commodity as the entire country has been wrecked by severe fuel shortages. Early reports indicate onlookers rushed to the scene with buckets to scoop up what they could of the tanker's valuable cargo, likely for resale on the black market, as the fuel spilled toward a nearby pile of trash before the entire tanker imploded.

Monday saw demonstrations in major cities across the country against the government's decision to raise fuel prices, with truck drivers leaving their vehicles parked blocking major roadways.

The grave shortages of gas and the gruesome explosion resulting from it is the latest manifestation of widespread social suffering gripping the Caribbean nation and its working class. Haiti continues to reel from a 7.2 magnitude earthquake that killed more than 2,200 people and destroyed tens of thousands of homes this past summer. This was on top of the July 7 assassination of President Jovenel Moise, a killing that has left the political structure of the country in near-shambles and which has paved the way for evermore rampant violence by gangs connected to the government and its security forces.

Local officials indicated that the death count from the tank disaster is expected to rise significantly as rescue efforts are still ongoing, and patients with massive burns are being treated in hospitals. Federal and state authorities said they have deployed two field hospitals to Cap-Haitien to help treat burn

victims. Numerous people had been airlifted from Cap-Haitien to a hospital specializing in severe burns in the capital city of Port-au-Prince, according to Doctors Without Borders, the France-based international humanitarian organization that runs the hospital.

Hundreds of local residents looked on from rooftops in utter disbelief at the colossal loss of life from the inferno. "It's horrible what happened," said Patrick Almonor, deputy mayor of Cap-Haitien. "We lost so many lives." He stressed that the situation remained "critical" and also extended an appeal for blood donations, with many survivors sustaining life-threatening wounds in need of urgent treatment. "The city will need a lot of help to come out of this tragedy. The central government is offering to help but we are waiting to see it," he added.

Interim Prime Minister Ariel Henry visited the scene on Tuesday, saying his heart was "broken" after meeting some of the injured in hospital. He later tweeted that emergency funds had been released to help survivors, although no additional details were provided as to the amount of funds allotted or to what costs related to the disaster the funds would cover.

The heads of the country's Civil Protection forces and public health system said the biggest worry is the people who survived but were burned by the blast. "Our biggest concern is that a lot of those who were burned are in serious condition, and we could have more deaths in the coming days," Dr. Laure Adrien, director general of the health ministry, told the *Miami Herald*.

In addition to the estimated 60 who perished immediately from the fires and the 40 injured, several other residents died from their injuries in Justinien University Hospital, the city's largest medical facility. Cap-Haitien Deputy Mayor Almonor told the media Tuesday that nearly 50 houses were impacted by the fireball, and at least 42 homes were destroyed. Speaking on the latest tragedy to befall the impoverished and suffering nation, he described a ghastly scene, saying he had seen dozens of people literally "burned alive" and that it was "impossible to identify them."

Dozens of victims of the initial explosion were quickly rushed to hospitals where bandaged patients clustered next to each other on overcrowded floors, with doctors and nurses facing a shortage of both beds and supplies. Scenes of panic

unfolded in the courtyard of Justinien University among dismayed and saddened family members as news of the explosion spread.

One of the survivors, Riche Joseph, spent hours on the floor of the hospital connected to an IV while waiting for a bed. In grim testimony on the events that transpired, Joseph's sister, Bruna Lourdes, relayed that Joseph stepped out of the house late at night with their mother to look for a meal. After hearing the explosion, Lourdes rushed down from the hillside shantytown in panic. "I'm praying to God that he won't take his life," Lourdes said. Authorities said hospitals in Cap-Haitien seemed so dilapidated and ill-equipped to handle patients that 15 victims had to be evacuated by air to hospitals in Port-au-Prince.

The largest contributor to the enormous death toll is the desperation facing millions of poverty-stricken people who have been forced in recent months to scramble for gasoline amid dire shortages of fuel that have sent prices on the black market spiraling, forcing many businesses to close and shuttering countless gas stations. "Following this accident, civilians took the chance to collect the gas by filling up makeshift receptacles—causing a terrible explosion that led to numerous victims and major material damage," Haiti's civil protection director Jerry Chandler told AFP.

Prime Minister Henry, a figure deeply implicated in the murder of Moise himself and who represents a faction of Haiti's venal ruling elite, said that he was "sad and overwhelmed by this tragedy" in a tour around Justinien University Hospital. Presiding over a nation that is one of the most socially unequal in the entire world, the prime minister feigned sympathy for the victims of the tragedy, saying "this considerable loss of human life and all this pain is the result of people living in misery and in a precarious situation."

In a staggering display of hypocrisy and cynicism, Henry sought to cast blame for the catastrophe on the Haitian people themselves and not on the backwardness and social misery that is the outcome of centuries of capitalist oppression and neo-colonial exploitation, with the Haitian bourgeoisie doing the bidding of the imperialist powers. Henry pontificated, "the lack of education has resulted in people exposing themselves to danger."

Nothing has been done on the part of the government or official parties, much less US imperialism, to alleviate the social and economic crisis confronting millions. In fact, the entire political structure remains deeply unstable following the assassination of Moise as nearly all the seats in the government's parliament are vacant and no firm date has yet been set for long-delayed elections, though Henry said he expects them early next year. Less than a dozen elected officials are currently representing a country of more than 11 million people.

Not only is poverty ravaging the country, Haiti faces the prospect of a civil war as rival gangs continue to exert greater

damage over the country's infrastructure and overwhelm the government's makeshift police forces and seize control over the country's streets. Thousands of Haitians along the southern entrance of Port-au-Prince have been made homeless in recent weeks after being displaced from their homes by warring gangs.

Gangs have also aggravated the ongoing fuel crisis by blocking tanker access to the two ports in the capital where deliveries are made. The country is also seeing a surge in for-ransom kidnappings. In October, 17 missionaries from the US-based religious charity, Christian Aid Ministries, were abducted and taken hostage by the violent gang known as 400 Mawozo. Authorities have said the gang was demanding \$1 million per person, or they would kill each hostage if this payment was not met. Twelve of the hostages remain in captivity after five were released by their captors.

The spike in gang-related violence and kidnappings has led the US government to recently urge its citizens to leave Haiti, citing deep insecurity and the severe lack of fuel attributed to the gangs blocking gas distribution at terminals. Last month, Canada also announced it was pulling all but essential personnel from its embassy. Moreover, the fuel shortage has forced hospitals to turn away patients despite the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic and paralyze transportation systems.

Combined with the severe fuel shortage, gang-related kidnappings and shootings have prevented aid groups from visiting parts of the capital, Port-au-Prince, and beyond where they had previously distributed food, water and other basic goods. "It's just getting worse in every way possible," Margaret Lubin, Haiti director for the non-profit CORE, told AP news. "You see the situation deteriorating day after day, impacting life at every level," Lubin said, adding that aid organizations have gone into "survival mode."

More than 460 kidnappings have been reported by Haiti's National Police so far this year, more than double what was reported last year, according to the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti. In one of its recent reports, the agency said Haitians are "living in hell" under constant threats from armed gangs. "Rapes, murders, thefts, armed attacks, kidnappings continue to be committed daily, on populations often left to fend for themselves in disadvantaged and marginalized neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince and beyond," the report said.

The explosion in Cap-Haitien has exacerbated all of the political, economic and social maladies afflicting Haiti's working class and poor peasantry and demonstrates once again why a struggle against the entire capitalist system is an existential necessity.



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