

Massive explosion and fire in the Bronx kills one and injures at least eight

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A 77-year-old woman was killed and at least eight other people were injured, several critically, by a massive explosion and fire in the New York City borough of the Bronx on Tuesday morning. The alarm went out shortly before 11 a.m. on Tuesday, and 200 firefighters and EMS personnel responded.

The dead woman was identified as Martha Dagbasta. Two other elderly women, 82 and 68 years old, were seriously injured, and five cops who dealt with the fire were overcome by smoke inhalation. Other residents appear to have narrowly escaped death or serious injury.

Although fire department officials and Mayor Eric Adams said that investigation of the cause of the explosion was just beginning, there were reports that the odor of gas had been noted by neighborhood residents that morning, pointing to a possible gas leak. The explosion led to the partial collapse of an entire building, a three-story row house. As seen on local television, eyewitnesses reported the massive boom of the explosion was heard first, followed by an enormous cloud of ash and flames.

The entire back of the row house collapsed, with some furniture thrown into the street. Even before firefighters got to the scene, neighbors rushed to the aid of fire victims, pulling several to safety. The rapidly spreading fire was quickly contained, before it endangered others, including at a day care center across the street.

The explosion took place on Fox Street, near Intervale Avenue, in the Longwood section of the south Bronx. That is less than three miles from the deadlier fire disaster that took place only a week earlier in a 19-story high rise on East 181st Street. In that calamity, smoke inhalation took the lives of 17, including several children, in the worst fire death toll in New York in

more than 30 years.

The Longwood explosion is reminiscent of other recent disasters, some more deadly, caused by gas leaks and other problems, pointing both to aging infrastructure in the city's working class neighborhoods, as well as to shortcuts or inadequate maintenance carried out by Con Edison, the massive utility monopoly that provides electricity and gas to New York City and neighboring Westchester County.

The highly profitable private utility, which is regulated by the city, shut off gas for the entire block after the explosion, and nearby residents were evacuated and temporarily housed in a neighborhood church and other locations. Fire marshals said that questions remained on the structural stability of adjoining buildings in the row of attached houses.

The worst of the recent explosions took place in East Harlem, another one of the city's poorer neighborhoods, back in 2014. In that case, eight people lost their lives and 50 were injured when two buildings were destroyed. In 2009, a gas leak in a Queens building led to the death of one resident, a nurse.

Con Edison of New York is one of a number of subsidiaries of Consolidated Edison, Inc. This holding company has been reporting annual profits of about \$13 billion in the last few years. As the latest tragedy suggests, while its shareholders have been making a killing, inadequate building inspections and aging pipes and other infrastructure may have led to other killings. In the case of the 2014 explosion and building collapse, the company reached a settlement with New York state for \$153 million in 2017, without admitting guilt or responsibility. Even this sizable settlement amounted to little more than 1 percent of the parent company's annual profits.

Democratic Mayor Eric Adams, who has been on the

job for barely two weeks, has been responding to housing fires since he took the oath of office. These “accidents” are an indication of the raging social crisis in New York, one that has been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic over the past two years. Adams rushed back up to the Bronx for the second disaster in about eight days. He spoke about the lives that had been saved, paid tribute to the cops who had been injured, and expressed sympathy for those impacted by the latest disaster.

The new mayor said nothing about the social conditions in the Bronx, however. It is the city’s poorest borough, regularly registering the highest levels of unemployment, poverty and homelessness. New York City overall now has a population of nearly 9 million, with nearly half in poverty or near poverty. Millions live in substandard housing, where inadequate heat and the need for space heaters can lead to devastating fires like the one that killed 17 a week ago. Others struggle to cope with aging infrastructure, which is suspected in this week’s explosion.



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