

Explosion rocks Valero's Port Arthur, Texas refinery

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A massive explosion at a Valero oil refinery in Port Arthur, Texas, sent shock waves through the city Monday evening. City officials blocked roads and issued an emergency shelter-in-place order for much of the coastal city, located 90 miles (145 kilometers) east of Houston. No casualties have been reported as of this writing.

At around 7:30 p.m. local time, the catastrophic explosion ejected plumes of toxic black smoke into the sky, with the blast audible over 11 miles (17 kilometers) away, according to residents. Officials are monitoring levels of volatile organic compounds, but no warnings have been issued to residents.

The 125-year-old facility is among the top 10 largest US refineries, outputting up to 435,000 barrels per day (bpd) and plays a pivotal role in the processing of heavy sour crude into gasoline, diesel and jet fuel.

Preliminary forensic observations, according to statements from local officials, indicate the primary failure occurred within the 243-diesel hydrotreater unit, which has a 47,000 bpd capacity. Utilizing high-pressure hydrogen gas to remove sulfur, nitrogen and metals from distillate streams, the hydrotreater produces hydrogen sulfide as a byproduct, an extremely toxic and highly flammable gas.

The initial detonation caused a rash of secondary fires, including in the adjacent fluid catalytic cracking (FCC) unit, the “core” of the refinery’s gasoline production. To prevent a total loss of the facility, the entire complex had to be shut down.

Containment efforts were severely hampered, as the refinery’s critical utilities, including water and steam necessary for firefighting and safe de-pressurization of

other units, suffered a total loss. Operators were forced to vent and flare massive quantities of unstable hydrocarbons into the atmosphere, which exacerbated the risk of further fire outbreaks. These toxic chemicals are directly linked to cancer, respiratory diseases and other severe health risks.

This is the second massive US refinery disaster in under six months, following the explosion at a Los Angeles-area Chevron refinery. Like the Valero incident, the blast could be heard from miles away and miraculously left no casualties.

The disaster comes as oil giants race to capitalize on soaring energy prices, as the criminal US-Israeli war on Iran spirals into an ever-deepening quagmire, destabilizing global energy markets. In the first full day of trading after the explosion, Valero saw its stock price rise, then settle almost 2 percent up for the day. Overall, oil prices soared 37 percent in under a month, and the S&P 500 Energy Index climbed nearly 30 percent year to date.

A critical element in their ability to extract war profits is the role of the United Steelworkers (USW) bureaucracy, which announced a sellout pattern agreement only days before the war broke out. Last week, over 800 USW members were locked out at the BP refinery in Whiting, Indiana. The bureaucracy is isolating this struggle, even though the company is demanding deep concessions which would set precedents throughout the industry.

Valero maintains a pattern of catastrophic unit failures and chronic environmental non-compliance in Port Arthur. Over the summer of 2007, a series of incidents at the facility led to the hospitalization of about 40 workers for toxic gas inhalation, a gasoline spill in a nearby waterway required extensive remediation, and another massive explosion forced a

facility shutdown. From 2014 to 2019, the facility was cited for multiple “emissions events” and permit exceedances, where unauthorized air contaminants were released into the surrounding community.

In March 2011 at its St. Charles refinery in Louisiana, 30-year-old contractor Victor Rodriguez fell to his death from a ladder after being exposed to lethal levels of hydrogen sulfide, and a second worker barely survived, being caught in a ladder guard.

In August 2014, an explosion at the diesel facility on-site triggered a fire that raged for hours, spewing toxic gases into the community, who were not notified until they watched the event on the news.

And in March 2015, a contract worker collapsed and died on the job, which turnaround specialist JV Industrial Companies characterized as an “isolated incident.” In reality, it was the inevitable outcome of mandatory overtime and the use of hyperexploited contract workers.

These types of avoidable disasters are not uncommon along the Gulf Coast refinery corridor, which is home to the largest concentration of refining capacity in the hemisphere. Under both Democratic and Republican administrations, chronic safety violations, deaths, disasters and environmental degradation have continued unabated, leading only to token fines.

The Trump administration most recently gutted funding for the Chemical Safety Board that has, since 1998, been tasked with some measure of oversight in Texas and Louisiana.



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