

Residents return after blast

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RENE JOHNSTON/TORONTO STAR

Carlos Lopez and a tearful Lucia Echevarria walk away from the scene with their cat La Gringa after a massive explosion in Toronto's northwest on Sunday, Aug. 10, 2008.

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Some residents remain out of their homes this morning after a massive explosion and fire that rocked a north-end neighbourhood early yesterday.

All lanes and ramps on Hwy. 401 were reopened as the morning rush hour began. The TTC expects to be running as usual in the area, and CN has approved the GO Transit Barrie line, although commuters should expect minor delays. GO bus service should also be operating from the Yorkdale bus terminal as scheduled.

However, about a quarter of the homes at the blast site, near Wilson Ave. and Keele St., are still inaccessible to residents after the Fire Marshal discovered asbestos and cordoned off five streets within a one-block radius. Those streets include:

- Fredrick Teesdale Circle, buildings 201-226
- All of Murray Rd.
- All of Garratt Blvd.
- Wilson Ave., Regent Rd., Katherine Rd., Spalding Rd., and Plewes Rd.- from Murray Rd. to Ancastor Rd.
- Gilley Rd. from Garratt Blvd. to Ancastor Rd.

- Home Rd. west of Ancastor Rd.
- The west side of Ancastor Rd.

Police allowed some residents back into the explosion area in what they called a "controlled return procedure" after the evacuation order was officially lifted at around 7:30 p.m., escorting them to their houses and apartments or allowing them to park cars and walk from checkpoints.

The evacuation centre remained open overnight to provide accommodation for those who could not return to their homes due to damage. Police will continue to provide extra patrols of the area to guard against looting.

Hydro service south of Wilson St. to Hwy. 401 and Dufferin St. has been restored. Power on other streets will be restored transformer-by-transformer.

Enbridge Gas is working to restore the gas supply to the area and will be going door to door to ensure it is safe to turn gas back on over the next few days.

Although it was a miracle that thousands escaped unscathed from the series of massive explosions in the city's northwest end, a firefighter died and at least one other person remains unaccounted for. The missing employee was identified as Parvinder Saini.

The firefighter, identified as Bob Leek, was declared dead after being taken to hospital with no vital signs. He collapsed on the grounds of the Sunrise Propane Industrial Gases distribution plant in the Wilson Ave. and Keele St. area that literally blew up early yesterday morning, forcing thousands to flee.

Toronto Fire Division Chief David Sheen said Leek, a 25-year firefighting veteran and a personal friend, did not die of any trauma inflicted at the scene, such as being hit by falling debris.

"It was not traumatic circumstances," Sheen said, his voice quivering. "There was every effort made to resuscitate him."

The cause of death, or the exact time he died, are not known, officials said, and will probably be determined at an autopsy in the next couple of days.

As of yesterday afternoon, officials said a total of 18 people had been injured. Saini is believed to be the propane plant's truck dispatcher.

The explosions at the massive propane distribution plant in Downsview led to a shutdown of a chunk of the city's northwest corner and the evacuation of thousands of residents, many of them elderly.

The neighbourhood "got off very lucky," said Division Commander Bob O'Hallarn.

"The situation has improved. It's going in the right direction. It's still a risk but not as much of a risk as it was before.

"There was a very, very large amount of fire when we arrived and the extent of the explosion, if the blast was heard as far away as it was, could have been much more serious."

O'Hallarn said returning residents will face shattered windows, garage doors blown off their hinges, roofs damaged by flying chunks of metal and trees torn apart by the force of the conflagration.

Confusion reigned shortly before 3 p.m. yesterday when the TTC announced it was reopening subway service to the area, including to the station at Yorkdale mall where, at the same time,

officials at the mall were ordering an evacuation of the property.

Mall security supervisor Roger O'Neale said police ordered this without saying why. Winston Stevens, who works at the Indigo bookstore, said people had been told the safety zone "had been moved" and they should leave the mall and remove themselves south of Lawrence Ave.

While subway service in the area was being resumed, some TTC bus routes were still being diverted and a 10-kilometre stretch of Canada's busiest highway, the 401, was shut down as was the southern end of Highway 400, which carries people to and from cottage country. The highway was re-opened at around 8 p.m., but the restricted ramps will remain closed for some time.

As fire crews finished extinguishing two rail tanks each containing up to 220,000 litres of propane that could have caused another cataclysmic blast, locals were demanding to know why Sunrise was allowed to move into a well-established residential neighbourhood about five years ago.

The Technical Standards and Safety Authority has sent two propane experts to the scene at the request of the Ontario Fire Marshal's office, which is investigating the explosion.

As officers of the court, they have the power to make arrests in the case of infractions of TSSA regulations.

"Why would they allow a propane company to open up in a residential area?" said Fernando Caschera, 56. "I don't understand."

Sunrise, open around the clock as a propane dealer, "should never have been there in the first place," said Merv Mostoway, 73.

"It was only a matter of time – I knew one day something stupid would happen."

The blasts came just before 4 a.m., shattering windows and reportedly setting several buildings on fire. Police with bullhorns ordered the evacuation of everyone within a 1.6-kilometre radius.

A no-fly zone for small aircraft was ordered above the scene and traffic backed up for kilometres as Highways 400 and 401 were closed down.

Jeff Green, 40, lives on the street next to Sunrise. He said he thought the first explosion was thunder.

"Then I realized the floor, my bed, the bathroom were covered in broken glass."

He got into his car to take a closer look and, as he drove with the window down, "the whole . . . thing blew up. There was so much heat - like turning a stove burner on full and putting your face next to it. There was a fireball that had to be 20 storeys high and 20 storeys wide. And this awful hissing sound of escaping gas."

Green went back to his house, got his parents and took them to a hotel near Yorkdale mall. Only then, he said, did he realize "the absolutely insane danger of having that propane facility so close to a community. I'd never thought about it before. I feel like an idiot now. We were totally unprepared.

"There has to be an official inquiry. They should search the country and if there are other facilities like this close to houses, they've got to move them."

Mostoway lives with his mother Doris, 91, who uses a wheelchair. "I can't get around so I had to wait for him to come and get me," she said. "It scared me to death."

“It took me a half hour to put my clothes on. It was booming so bad,” said her son. “Half the people on the street were running out of their houses naked, for god’s sake.”

Carlos Montoya recalled “explosion after explosion . . . I thought it was a terrorist attack.”

Other people thought it was an earthquake or an airliner crashing.

“It sounded like an atomic bomb,” said Caschera. “The house shook. It was bright-lit sky like daylight. It made me fall off the bed. My father wakes up and he goes, ‘What are you making so much noise for?’ I said, ‘Dad, that wasn’t me.’ Then the next explosion . . . I said, ‘Get out! Get out! Get out!’”

The TTC sent shuttle buses for evacuees who were first taken to CFB Downsview and then to York University.

Dozens of others gathered at a Coffee Time shop at Dufferin and Wilson, buying each other coffee, lending each other clothes and, in some cases, discovering that they lived in the same three-storey buildings in the neighbourhood, most of which are above stores.

Jillian Manning, her husband Wayne and their 6-month-old son Bryce live above the hair salon that she runs. She was worried because she’d been scheduled to do a bride’s hair and makeup later in the morning.

“I feel bad,” Manning said. “I hope she found someone.”

With the power out, the Mannings used a cellphone to light their way out of their apartment. They had no socks or formula for the baby but someone in the parking lot gave them what they needed, Jillian said.

“Everybody was running around with nighties on and no shoes,” she said. “It feels like I’m sleepwalking now.”

The couple are well insured, she said, but Montoya and others said they had no insurance.

“It was just a tremendous explosion and blew all the windows out of the house, just blew the house up, and I just managed to get out of there in time,” said Robert Halman, who was covered in cuts and bruises as he fled his home.

Halman said he saw a “huge fireball” and heard “multiple explosions,” and, as he ran out of his house, a “wave of heat” was not far behind.

An emergency worker at Bombardier Aerospace’s Downsview operation said he saw propane tanks falling from the sky.

More than 120 firefighters were on the scene and police went door to door making sure everyone was out of the area. Propane burns clean and quickly and air quality was not a concern, O’Hallarn said.

The alarm was raised after a driver filling up his tanker spotted smoke at Sunrise Propane.

Some residents wearing only their nightclothes walked to nearby Yorkdale mall, where security gave them water and a place to rest until they found shelter elsewhere.

Beatrice Zampini, 48, wiped away tears as she sat in the mall’s makeshift emergency shelter with her teenage son and daughter by her side. She hadn’t heard from her husband, Gino, who disappeared in the midst of the chaos.

“He was going to check on my parents, but the explosions were getting louder and louder, so the three of us just ran and ran and ran,” she said.

Residents described their neighbourhood as a tight-knit community where extended families lived on the same street.

The explosion was heard and felt as far away as Yonge and Sheppard where people were awakened, got dressed and gathered in the streets outside their homes.

The Sunrise website says the company serves residential, industrial and agriculture clients. The industrial gases it supplies includes nitrogen, propane, helium and argon. It also provides safety training for propane and dangerous goods certificates.

Propane is stored and transported in a compressed liquid form, vapourizing only when pressure is released. The gas is an asphyxiant, meaning it cuts off oxygen to the body and can cause suffocation. Exposure to high levels of propane can cause health problems, including frostbite if it touches skin.

Josei Miceli, 59, who has lived in the area for 40 years, says it's full of elderly people who aren't mobile.

"We were concerned when this company moved at the end of the street," said Miceli, who snatched her small Yorkshire terrier, Harley, before fleeing her home. "But we weren't even advised that they were going to be there. They just moved in and we've been concerned since they were there that something like this would happen. I'm surprised that they let a company like that move in a residential area."

With files from Michele Henry, Noor Javed, Daniel Dale, Paola Loriggio, Laura Stone and The Canadian Press.

WHY PROPANE IS DANGEROUS

There's a reason why propane-fuelled vehicles are banned from underground parking garages. If the gas leaks, a little goes a long way and a minor leak can cause a major explosion.

Propane - the main constituent of the liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) widely used as for heating and home barbecues - is heavier than air, meaning it will sink to the ground and stay there. Even a spark can set it off.

Propane tanks, whether they be a 200,000-litre storage unit or a barbecue bottle, contain about 80 per cent liquid with the remaining space for vapour. Relief valves on the tank open when the pressure exceeds the design limits.

The gas that escapes rapidly expands. The liquid contents of an average barbecue tank - could expand to more than 380 cubic metres of potentially explosive gas - enough to cover a parking garage 40 metres by 30. Vehicle propane tanks are usually at least one-and-a-half times as big as a barbecue tank.