

State

Grain elevator explosion kills three, injures many

United Press International
CORPUS CHRISTI—A public grain elevator located in a heavy industrial area near the Corpus Christi harbor exploded during a shift change Tuesday, killing three

men and injuring many employees.

The explosion occurred about 3:10 p.m. as workers from the day shift were leaving and those on the evening shift were arriving.

Officials on the scene said at least six silos exploded, and additional explosions were possible as long as an accompanying fire continued.

"Anytime you have fires around

the grain dust you can have more explosions," said Assistant Fire Chief Victor R. Garcia. "We have about 11 units there and at least 50 men. There are probably more because a lot of off-duty men came in to help."

The Nueces County medical examiners' office confirmed three men were dead.

"We have identified two of them but have not reached their

next of kin, so we can't release their names," the examiners' office said. "The third has not been identified."

Army and Coast Guard helicopters hovered near the scene to assist in rescue efforts, a spokesman said. Many employees were believed still trapped in the elevator.

"It was a very disastrous explosion," said Sgt. Jack Clemons, a Nueces County sheriff's deputy.

The industrial area around the elevator outside of Corpus Christi city limits was evacuated, Clemons said.

Sandy Frazier, a spokeswoman for the Memorial Medical Center, said 22 people had been brought into the hospital, one of them critically injured.

"We have had 22 admissions, 19 are being treated in E.R. (emergency room)," she said. "One victim is in critical condition; seven are burn victims. We understand the fire is still under way, and we should expect more injuries."

Clemons said ambulances were dispatched from Corpus Christi and neighboring Robstown and Portland to care for the injured.

Several ambulances were called back to the scene, he said.

All available deputies were on the scene and the civil defense had been called in to assist with rescue operations, he said.

Witnesses at the scene said smoke from the fire that erupted after the blast billowed 500 feet into the air, visible from about one mile away.

"We went right over there when we heard the explosion," said Darrell Johnson, assistant manager of Producers Grain Port Terminal, located about a mile and a half from the elevator.

"I talked to Bill Jackson, the superintendent. He said he heard a rumble, told his men to hit the decks," Johnson said. "He had his eyes closed tight but he could still see the fire."

"He wasn't actually burned, but he was singed a little and his face was black. He was blown clear through the window of his office."

Johnson said the force of the blast was so strong, huge pieces of cement were littering the area.

"It blew one big piece of cement, about 10 to 15 feet wide and just as long onto a nearby road,"

he said. "The headhouse (where all controls and switches are located) is just gone. It blew it out, over."

He said most of the injuries saw were burns, and many of the victims were being taken out the area by helicopter.

James Roberts, employee of Hatcher Port Iron Works, located about one mile from the elevator, said the explosion shook his building.

"It was pretty loud," he said. "It shook this whole building. When I heard it go up, I didn't know exactly what it was. As soon as I heard the noise of the explosion — it sounded like two or three explosions, just kind of rumbled — I looked out the door and saw the smoke coming. All I could see was smoke."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington said eight federal grain inspectors were at the elevator but all had been accounted for. The agency did not say why the inspectors were at the elevator, owned by the Nueces County Navigation District.

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Witnesses criticize state embalming bill

AUSTIN — A proposed embalming bill brought 113 witnesses to House Economic Development Committee hearing, many of them criticizing the reinstatement of embalming dead bodies that remain unburied for 24 hours as well as those that will be cremated.

Carol Barger of the Consumers Union said the only purpose in requiring embalming is to encourage open caskets and therefore more impressive and expensive caskets and funerals.

The bill would permit the body to be refrigerated if it is not embalmed, but Johnny B. Rogers, general counsel of the Texas Funeral Directors Association, said, "very few funeral homes have refrigeration facilities."

"Don't let anybody tell you that this is one big glaring consumer issue," Rogers said. "Ninety-nine percent of the people who come into Texas funeral homes want the traditional funeral with embalming."

Dr. Charles Petty, chief medical examiner for Dallas County, whose office handles 3,000 bodies a year, told the committee that embalming retards decomposition.

Sen. Lloyd Doggett, D-Austin, an opponent of compulsory embalming, pointed out that current law does not prevent embalming for health purposes or for examination of the body.

Dr. James Reveley, a dentist, mortician and owner of a funeral home in San Antonio, told the committee that embalming presents a great danger of spreading disease as failure to embalm.

Sen. O. H. Harris, R-Dallas, chairman of the committee, warned that he does not intend to permit all 113 witnesses to testify in the hearings, which were scheduled to resume Tuesday, and he asked the opponents to condense their presentations.

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