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El Paso explosion damages homes

United Press International

EL PASO — Nine people were injured Tuesday when a natural gas explosion demolished a house and damaged at least 18 other homes in a quiet residential area. There were no deaths.

It was the second such explosion in two days. A leaking natural gas pipeline in neighboring Juarez, Mexico exploded Sunday, injuring 34.

Luis Velez, 52 and his wife, Virginia, 49, who lived in the house that exploded, were in satisfactory condition at Sun Towers Hospital. Their son, Martin, 20, also was in satisfactory condition.

Flames were leaping 100 feet into the air when firefighters arrived at the scene. The blaze was under control in 20 minutes, firemen said.

Three people were treated and released from Beaumont Army Medical Center. The hospital identified them as retired Col. Ralph H. Pryor, his wife, Vera E. Pryor, and retired Staff Sgt. Gordon G. Thompson.

Laura Wiggs, 19, was treated for cuts and bruises at Sierra Hospital. Julia Ramirez, 71, another neighbor, was treated for cuts at Hotel Dieu Hospital. And Michael Saykley, 18, was treated and released from Providence Memorial Hospital with facial cuts.

Gary Nelson, construction and maintenance supervisor for Southern Union Gas, said he speculated that a gas leak was the cause of the explosion.

Deputy Fire Chief Mike Durvey said investigators believe the blast may have been caused by natural gas, but they are not ruling out the possibility it could have been caused by an explosive device.

"I am leaning toward natural gas as the cause," Dury Cindy Rupel, 25, who lives in an apartment complex a block and a half away, said. Rupel said she heard a loud boom shortly after 6 a.m.

"It knocked me out of bed it was so loud," she said. "There was one big blast and two smaller blasts. I ran into my daughter's bedroom to make sure that she was alright, and when I looked out the window, I saw fire

shooting up from the house and debris flying all over the place," she said.

Josephine Harper, another neighbor, said she thought the explosion was a bolt of lightning.

"I thought it was lightning because of the boom, and the sound of what I thought was rain on the roof, but it really wasn't rain," she said. "It turned out to be debris from the house."

"I looked out in the street and saw people running down the streets, and then we saw the flames shooting straight up. There were a number of roofs that were lifted off the houses, moved, and a lot of structural damage."

Harper said glass light fixtures in her house broke, raining glass down on her head.

"Glass hit me on the head, and there was glass shattering all over," she said. "All of our China has been broken."

Walter Cotter, who lives next door, called the explosion worse than World War II.

"I've been through World War II, but this was even worse because it was unexpected," he said. "It was a boom that shook the entire house. Debris was flying all over and hitting the roof like rain."

Debris from the blast was scattered over a nearby street, and windows in neighborhood homes were shattered.

Joel Ortiz, 17, was on his way to the bus stop when the blast knocked him to the sidewalk. He said when he got up, he heard shouts for help and saw Martin Velez, 20, trapped by flames in the debris.

He picked his way through the rubble and carried Velez out by the shoulders, police said.

Following the blast, a one-square block area was blocked off and power was cut off to the area.

David Tarango, a spokesman for the fire department, said the explosion caused damage to buildings half a mile away and was felt five to six miles away.

The site of Tuesday's blast is just five miles from the one in Juarez.

Phillips oil union members vote to defer pay increase

United Press International

BORGER — Phillips Petroleum Co. union members voted to defer a pay increase, which might eventually come through the purchase of employee stock, a union spokesman said Tuesday.

Refusing to reveal the vote count, the president of the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 351 said only that "a substantial margin voted to defer" the average \$730 annual pay increase.

Similar votes are expected soon by Phillips union members in Houston; St. Louis; Shilder, Okla.; Oklahoma City; Bartlesville and Woods Cross, Utah; Local 351 president Bob Grove said.

The Phillips Borger operation has 1,100 union members, which is the biggest concentration at any of its plants, Grove said.

The pay increase was scheduled to take effect Tuesday. But Phillips management last week asked its employees to defer the wage hike until stockholders have a chance to vote on a recapitalization plan.

The recapitalization plan is to include a proposed Employee Incentive Stock Ownership Plan of which few details have been disclosed yet. Grove said employees also will vote later on whether to accept that.

Grove said Phillips administration refused to release details of the employee stock plan until the plan was ready to present to stockholders.

He said he was not certain, but believed the wage increase probably would be applied to the purchase of employee stock if that plan is approved.

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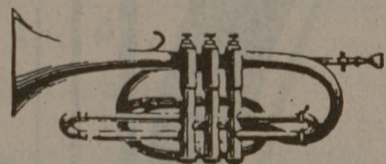
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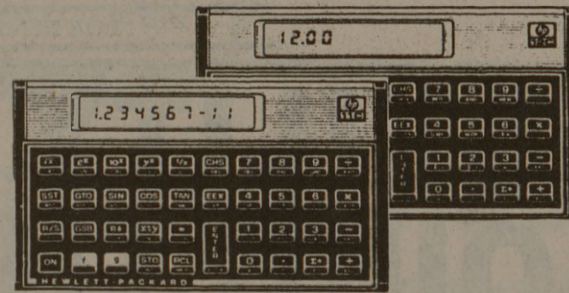
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