

Deadly gas explosion in Taiwanese city kills dozens

Ben McGrath
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A series of large explosions last week ripped through the Taiwanese city of Kaohsiung, the second most populous city in the country, leaving scenes of destruction in its wake. The disaster has thrown people out of their homes and generated fears of a repeat in the future. Estimated reconstruction costs, so far, are \$NT1.9 billion (\$US63 million).

The explosions were caused by a major gas leak from one of the numerous pipelines running under the city. Kaohsiung, which is located at the southern end of Taiwan, is a major petrochemical hub. Shortly before midnight last Thursday, the blasts ripped through large portions of the town, destroying roads near the City Hall and the popular Guanghai Night Market. Many homes were also destroyed or damaged by the blasts, which left behind large craters in many neighborhoods.

Witnesses described the ensuing flames as reaching ten storeys into the air. The blasts were so strong that vehicles were thrown onto the tops of three-storey buildings. Rescuers reported finding a survivor on top of a building after his motorcycle was spotted on a roof. Kuo Chu-wang, a local resident, recounted: "It was horrible. You only know how terrifying it was if you were here to see the fires."

At least 28 people were killed and more than 300 people injured, many of whom suffered severe burns. The number of casualties may rise as the search for the missing continues through devastated portions of the city. Rescue efforts have been slow as those looking for survivors have been using small tools and their bare hands for fear of triggering additional explosions. Two firefighters are still counted among the missing.

The cause of the leak and the subsequent blast has been traced back to the LCY Chemical Corporation. The Kaohsiung Environmental Protection Bureau stated that a pipeline owned by LCY was the only one

carrying the highly flammable chemical known as Propene which was the only gas detected at the site. Propene, also called propylene, is a chemical with a variety of uses, including making polyester.

The head of the Environmental Protection Bureau Chen Chin-te stated: "Our inspection indicates that LCY's pipeline showed irregularities around 8 p.m. The amount of flow in the pipe dropped from 22 tons per hour to 19 tons, and was even down to 1 ton at one point." This drop indicates there was some sort of leakage from the pipe. In fact, approximately three hours before the first explosion, residents reported a possible gas leak, citing the smell.

Despite this, the company failed to notify authorities. Following the explosions, LCY attempted to deny blame for the accident, with chairman Lee Bowei suggesting that another type of gas might have caused the blast or that nearby construction damaged the pipe. However, the company confirmed that it detected the leak at 8:49 p.m., but took almost an hour to conduct any tests.

The pipeline was constructed in 1994 by the state-owned CPC Corporation before being handed over to LCY. After the blasts, the latter admitted that it had not conducted safety inspections of its pipelines in the past, with a spokeswoman claiming: "We don't even have the keys to the tunnel for maintenance."

This is not the first major disaster caused by the company. In 1986, an LCY factory in Hsinchu City was shut down after it released hazardous chemicals into the city's water supply.

On Saturday, Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou attempted to calm public anger while also deflecting blame by suggesting the cause of the blasts was not fully known. Ma said: "Everyone is concerned about the cause of the incident and the cabinet has set up a

task force to investigate and hope to find the cause in the shortest possible time.”

Many residents were in complete shock following the explosion, some too afraid to return to their homes. Thousands of homes lost electricity, water, and gas. Fear over the city’s other pipelines has generated concerns over a recurrence.

Many people are just now finding out that their homes and apartment buildings have criss-crossing petrochemical pipes running underneath. One citizen, Ke Chih-jen said: “When we bought our home we had no idea; nobody would think about asking such a thing at the time of purchase.”

The city’s mayor, Chen Chu, has asked for help in locating and replacing the old lines. “I instructed relevant units to thoroughly inspect the pipelines and call for the central government to review how to properly locate them so residents do not live under invisible threats and to prevent another tragedy.”

Another city spokesman Ting Yun-kung said: “Some of the pipelines are 20 to 30 years old. We’re investigating where they are. We will step up inspections of them.” However, Citizens of the Earth, an environmental group, claimed that some of the pipes were even older—some more than 40 years old.

Responsibility for this man-made disaster lies with the company and the government, which both placed profit before the safety of people. Rather than replacing the aging pipelines which would have placed a financial burden on LCY and other companies, they ignored the state of the infrastructure, resulting in last week’s tragedy.

In a country where earthquakes are common, the aging pipes running under the city are increasingly in danger of rupturing. The fact that the government lacked any oversight over companies in an industry dealing with highly explosive chemicals is nothing short of criminal. The rhetoric coming from the city government as well as from Taipei about safety and long-overdue inspections of companies dealing with hazardous materials is simply meant to defuse public anger.



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