

Event Date: 23 October 2009

Report Date: 26 October 2009

Explosion at Oil Storage Facility, San Juan, Puerto Rico

Type of Event:	Explosion at Caribbean Petroleum Oil Storage Facility
Date of Event:	23/10/2009
Location:	San Juan, Puerto Rico
Number Killed:	0 (several injured)
Damage Estimate:	-
Insured Loss Estimate:	-
Insured:	-
Carriers:	-



Summary

A massive explosion on 23 October caused severe damage at Caribbean Petroleum Corporation's Bayamon oil storage and refinery facility near Puerto Rico's capital of San Juan. The blast and subsequent fire, one of the largest ever seen in the US Caribbean island territory, sent a towering column of black toxic smoke into the air, raising fears of a public health risk and pollution damage. Around 1,500 people were evacuated from the nearby Sabana Amelia neighbourhood due to smoke contamination concerns as the fire burned for more than two days. Reports said the explosion and fire destroyed at least 18 of the oil facility's 40 storage tanks, which contained products such as jet fuel, bunker fuel and gasoline. The tanks at Caribbean Petroleum hold about 10% of the gasoline consumed in Puerto Rico, according to Consumer Affairs Secretary Luis Rivera Marin. However, he added there was no risk of shortages.

The explosion rocked San Juan and its surrounding areas, shattering windows in some buildings. Officials said the blast triggered a 2.8 magnitude jolt on the Richter scale and Puerto Rico Governor Luis Fortuno declared a state of emergency in the capital and four other towns, freeing up federal funds to help reconstruction efforts. President Barack Obama also designated Puerto Rico an emergency zone and ordered federal aid to supplement local efforts.

Reports said a dozen employees were working at the facility when the explosion occurred. No-one was killed but numerous minor injuries were reported. Several drivers were reportedly hurt when the explosion shattered glass in their cars and at least four people also sought medical help for respiratory problems. However, officials said all the plant workers were safe. The fuel-storage tanks exploded around 00:30 local time (05:30 UTC), shaking San Juan, Guaynabo, Bayamon and two other local communities. Reports said the explosion set off fires in 21 of the site's 40 tanks that supply Caribbean Petroleum's 200 Gulf gas stations in Puerto Rico. The facility also included a 48,000 barrel-per-day (bpd) refinery, but this was not in operation, according to Caribbean Petroleum. A company spokesman declined to say how much fuel was in the tanks at the time of the explosion.

Around 150 firefighters, supported by the National Guard, tackled the blaze, which at its peak saw flames reach a height of 100 feet (30 metres). Crews extinguished the last of the flames on 25 October and the huge cloud of smoke that hovered over San Juan has started to dissipate. Governor Fortuno estimated the initial cost to fight the fire at USD6.4 million, but did not give a breakdown. He added that the area is no longer in imminent danger and hundreds of people who had been evacuated from their homes were starting to return.

As the site was made secure, investigators from the FBI, Puerto Rico Police Department, the Bureau of Alcohol, Firearms, Tobacco and Explosives and the US Chemical Safety Board prepared to inspect the scene and collect evidence. Security was subsequently stepped up at Puerto Rico's other oil facilities in the south coast town of Guayanilla and at Yabucoa on the east coast but officials said it is too early to determine the cause of the explosion. More than 100 investigators have been sent to investigate the incident. Environmental safety officials said that the air quality has improved in the San Juan area and they have begun to clean areas surrounding the site. Governor Fortuno said air quality monitoring would continue, and the surrounding area would be inspected for other possible damage, such as pollution of waterways.

Sources: CNN News, Associated Press, Reuters News, Agence France Presse, BBC News, Waterloo Region Record

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