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Deadly Blast Rips Nuevo Progreso At Least 6 dead; Gas Leak Blamed

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NUEVO PROGRESO — The flip of a switch may have triggered a massive explosion Saturday that left at least six people dead and 14 injured.

The blast in the heart of this town's small tourist district destroyed two buildings and damaged a third, littering the street with debris.

Mexican officials blamed the explosion on an overnight gas leak in the Red Snapper restaurant that may have been ignited by a spark from a light switch as workers arrived at 8:30 a.m.

However, restaurateur Delia Bautista said that the restaurant does not open until 10 a.m. and none of her 15 employees were in the building at the time of the explosion. She also said that the restaurant's gas tank was found intact after the explosion.

"We think it was caused by something next door at the dentist," Bautista said.

She said the dental clinic belonged to Dr. Julio Alor, who could not be reached for comment.

Mexican authorities confirmed that Alor's sister Guadalupe Alor Galicia, 60, was among the dead.

Authorities also recovered the body of San Juanita Santiago, 17, who worked at a souvenir shop below the restaurant.

Tamaulipas state investigators arrived on the scene in the afternoon to begin a probe to determine the cause of the explosion.

Investigators have not determined if the gas was propane or butane.

Eyewitnesses reported an explosion, followed by a cloud of dust and flying debris that shattered windows and damaged doors of more than 16 buildings along Avenida Benito Juarez, the town's main street, between Calle Sonora and Calle Tamaulipas.

Manuel Correon Alvarez, owner of Restaurant Guanajuato across the street from the Red Snapper, said the blast sent glass flying from the windows into the kitchen.



Ric Vasquez / Valley Morning Star

Rescue workers form a human chain to remove debris as they search for survivors following Saturday morning's deadly explosion in Nuevo Progreso that left at least six people dead and 14 injured.

"It was like an earthquake," he said.

The explosion destroyed the dental clinic and a building where the Red Snapper restaurant is located on second floor with the Las Pavitas souvenir shop downstairs.

The explosion also took out more than half of the 15 businesses at the neighboring St. John's Plaza, a multi-story shopping center.

Electricity and gas services were reported to be out at buildings surrounding the epicenter of the explosion.

Authorities identified the four other individuals killed in the explosion as Natividad Avalos Hernandez, 49, of Progreso; and three Nuevo Progreso residents Ignacia Valenica Ramirez, 54; Angel Jesus Reyes and Francisco Rodriguez. The four were said to work at the Las Pavitas shop or as street vendors outside the shop.

Emergency medical service personnel took Emilia Huerta Esquivel, Yesica Angeles Marquez, Isidro Elizondo Rodriguez, Jacobo Gaytan Torres, Rosa Morena Duran, Jose Luis Rodriguez Hernandez, Teresa de Jesus Ramirez and a woman only identified as Lorena to hospitals in Rio Bravo, Reynosa and Weslaco to treat their injuries.

Two Mexican nationals, Paula Bautista, 19, and Adrian Lopez, 19, were believed to be trapped in the rubble as rescue workers removed the debris.

A group of U.S. Border Patrol agents scanned the rubble with the help of a helicopter and four trained dogs. About 3 p.m., the dogs spotted five areas where people might be trapped, said Lt. Rene Alaniz of the McAllen Fire Department.

"There is still a chance that someone might be alive in there," Alaniz said. "There is always a possibility."

Alaniz said the Border Patrol helicopter is equipped with infrared equipment that could help detect if anyone was trapped in the rubble.

It was unknown whether any Americans were thought to be missing.

"Thank God it was so early in the morning," Bautista said. "Normally, Saturdays are very busy."

None of the dead or injured were reported to be employees of the Red Snapper restaurant.

More than 200 Mexican police, firefighters and federal soldiers arrived to help with the rescue effort and block off the surrounding streets. The Mexican Army's 10th Cavalry Regiment, based in Reynosa, was summoned to secure the area.

The international bridge into the town, which was closed for more than six hours, reopened at 3:30 p.m. Francisco Pulido Serna, local director of tourism, said the small border town of 20,000 is dependent on tourism and despite the explosion, is still a safe destination.

"This is not an act of terrorism," said Serna. "It's a great tragedy what we have suffered because of an accident."

Saturday's explosion here is the second in two years. One person was killed and 12 were injured in an Oct. 1, 2002, explosion at an illegal fireworks factory.

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