

At least one dead in explosion in Minnesota neighborhood

By Eric London
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At least one person was killed in a fire that destroyed an apartment building in the working class district of Cedar-Riverside in Minneapolis, Minnesota on New Year's Day. A minimum of fourteen people are injured, six of them critically. Two additional apartment residents are missing and possibly dead.

The fire resulted from of an explosion inside the building which housed a Somali grocery store, as well as roughly ten apartments that housed working class, mostly Somali immigrants. When firefighters arrived on the scene Wednesday morning, several residents had leapt from the second and third floors and lay injured in the street. Temperatures at the time were about ten below zero Fahrenheit, making fire rescue especially difficult.

Despite the fact that the fire department has expressly eliminated the possibility that the fire was the product of an explosive device, Department of Homeland Security forces remained present at the scene. DHS has a large presence in the Minneapolis area. It closely monitors the city's large East African and Yemeni populations under the bogus auspices of combatting the "war on terror."

An investigation performed by the Minneapolis Fire Department revealed that the fire was likely caused by a natural gas explosion. Numerous eye-witnesses reported smelling a gas leak immediately preceding the explosion.

If the explosion was in fact the product of a natural gas leak, blame for the tragedy would fall on CenterPoint Energy, Inc., one of Minneapolis' main energy providers. CenterPoint officials have vehemently denied the possibility that natural gas was the cause of the explosion, despite the eye-witness testimony. Company spokeswoman Rebecca Virden said that there was no chance that the company was at

fault for the death of the immigrant worker.

"We had no natural gas in the area," she said, citing company-sponsored investigations and testing in the neighborhood.

Virden made the assertion that if the fire was the product of a natural gas leak, "the roof would have come off, the walls would come out," she said, despite the fact that the building was made of brick. Furthermore, Virden claimed that if gas was involved, "it could be a different type of gas," than the type provided by CenterPoint.

Despite the denials of the company, Minneapolis Fire Chief John Fruetel said that his department's investigations indicate that natural gas was the cause. "I'm just basing it on what my investigators say," Chief Fruetel said when asked to respond to CenterPoint's denials of responsibility.

The housing complex that was destroyed by the fire was built in 1886 and was poorly maintained. In Cedar-Riverside neighborhood, 50.1 percent of the population is under the federal poverty rate, and median household income stands at a mere \$26,688—far below the national average, according to the 2005-2009 American Community Survey.

A 2010 inspection of the building revealed that residents were living in units that had inadequate fire escapes and outdated, non-functional smoke detectors. Mice and insects had reportedly infested the living quarters and pigeons had nested in a room on the third floor. It is unclear whether these problems were fixed, but further inspections failed to mention the infestation and fire-safety issues, citing graffiti and other minor building issues.

Local residents praised the efforts of the firefighters, who braved sub-zero temperatures to fight the massive blaze.

Wali Dirie, director of a nearby civic organization, said that “the firefighters did a great job. They kept [the fire] from reaching our building.”

But despite the best efforts of the firefighters, it is unclear whether the remaining two missing persons will be recovered. Family members, 57-year-old Ahmad Ali and 60-year-old Mrimri Farah, expressed their fear of losing loved ones.

Ali’s ex-wife told the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, “I feel very bad but I cannot do anything. Imagine if you lost someone.”

Local Democratic Party officials have sought to prevent residents from drawing conclusions about the possible negligence of CenterPoint Energy. Both Congressman Keith Ellison and Mayor-elect Betsy Hodges described the explosion as unexplainable.

If the death of a worker and the injury of over a dozen more was caused by the negligence of CenterPoint Energy, then the explosion was far from unexplainable. If the company, whose net income was \$1.3 billion in 2011, can be shown to have failed to maintain the safety of the natural gas line, then high-ranking company officials should be charged for the murder of the explosion victim, and the company should be forced to pay medical expenses and damages to the victims and their families.

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