

More evacuations as Puerto Rico oil blaze burns on

Authorities in Puerto Rico on Friday ordered the evacuation of hundreds more residents from homes around a huge fire at an oil depot which spewed a column of toxic black smoke into the sky near the capital San Juan.

Some 130 firefighters, backed by National Guard troops, were still trying to put out the massive fire, hours after an early morning explosion triggered the blaze at the Caribbean Petroleum Corp. storage facility at Bayamon. After initially destroying 11 tanks at the 40-tank site, the fire spread to at least six more, containing products such as jet fuel, bunker fuel and gasoline. It was one of the largest fires ever in the US Caribbean island territory.

"There are 17 tanks ablaze, and the firefighters are cooling the rest to avoid their explosion," Puerto Rico Governor Luis Fortuno said. He declared a state of emergency in San Juan and four surrounding towns.

As flames licked up to a height of 100 feet over the oil facility, pushing a mushrooming black plume of smoke into the air, Fortuno announced the mandatory evacuation of the Sabana Amelia neighborhood, where around 1,000 to 1,500 people lived. The neighborhood is in the same Catano district from where around 350 people were evacuated earlier.

Despite the size of the blaze, no deaths have been reported, but at least two people were slightly hurt. Schools in the San Juan metropolitan area were closed during the day.

Winds from the south were pushing the huge column of black smoke from the fire out over the Atlantic, away from the population centers, but officials from the National Weather Service were watching for any wind changes that could threaten neighborhoods and require more evacuations.

Governor Fortuno asked residents to stay calm and remain indoors. Officials said they were also watching out for rain, which could mix with the smoke to create toxic rain.

Although officials said the incident was initially being treated as an accident, FBI agents were assisting the authorities in investigating the cause of the explosion.

The US Chemical Safety Board said it was also deploying a six-person team to San Juan to help with the inquiry.

EXPLOSION "LIKE EARTHQUAKE"

Fortuno said security had been protectively stepped up at the island's other oil facilities in the south coast town of Guayanilla and at Yabucoa on the east coast.

Puerto Rican authorities temporarily froze prices of gasoline and other oil products to prevent price gouging, but ruled out any risk of serious fuel shortages.

The early morning explosion which caused the fire rocked the surrounding area, shattering windows in some buildings.

"The heat was incredible. It was an inferno," said firefighter Juan Cruz, one of the first on the scene.

Housewife Tamara Rivera, 37, said she was awakened by a loud explosion in her Puerto Nuevo neighborhood. "I thought it was an earthquake, but when I went outside, I saw the big orange glow. It looked like daylight over there," she said.

Following the blast and fire, the US Coast Guard established a safety zone in the part of San Juan Bay closest to the fire location. No vessels were permitted to enter this zone without prior permission from the Captain of the Port.

But the terminal where tourist cruise lines dock in Old San Juan was not affected, a Coast Guard spokesman said.

The Caribbean Petroleum Corp (CPC) facility also included a 48,000 barrel-per-day (bpd) refinery, but this was not in operation, according to the CPC website. There were no immediate details on the extent of damage from the fire.

CPC has under contract more than 200 service stations in Puerto Rico to market Gulf brand gasoline and diesel.

Residents jammed gasoline stations, fearing a fuel shortage, but Fortuno said the island had enough supplies.