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Deadly explosion hits Texas fertilizer plant

Massive blast at fertiliser plant has killed between five and 15 people and wounded more than 100 others, police say.

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The blast on Wednesday night ripped through the West Fertilizer Company plant and destroyed numerous buildings including a school and nursing home, authorities said.

Authorities have refrained from divulging casualty figures, but said the death toll was expected to rise as search teams combed through the rubble of the fertiliser plant and surrounding homes.

Al Jazeera's Tom Ackerman, reporting from Washington DC, said that authorities were still conducting house to house search and the number of fatalities won't be established until after day light.

"The main concern right now is that wind gusts will have changed directions and that possibility of ammonia and other kinds of toxic fumes will endanger people in the other half of the town which has not yet been evacuated," he said.

West Mayor Tommy Muska told Reuters that five or six volunteer firefighters who were among the first on the scene in the blast zone were unaccounted for.

He added that all the residents have been evacuated and are in safe locations.

Dean Wilson, a spokesman for the Texas Department of Public Safety, said 50 to 75 houses were damaged by the explosion and a fire that followed, and that a nearby 50-unit apartment complex had been reduced to "a skeleton standing up".

He said it would be some time before authorities know the full extent of the loss of life and damage caused by Wednesday night's blast at the plant in the town of West, about 30km north of Waco.

The wounded have been taken to hospital, and a nearby nursing home had collapsed from the explosion and that people were believed trapped inside, Wilson said.

Rescue workers are trying to evacuate people from homes near the plant. Local police said the fire was still smoldering, preventing firefighters from carrying out their work.

Jason Shelton, 33, a father-of-two who lives less than 2km from the plant, said he heard fire trucks heading towards the facility five minutes before the explosion.

Lacerations and broken bones

He said he felt the concussion from the blast as he stood on his front porch.

"My windows started rattling and my kids screaming," Shelton told Reuters. The screen door hit me in the forehead ... and all the screens blew off my windows."

The blast was reported at about 8pm local time (01:00 GMT on Thursday) in West, about 130km south of city of Dallas. A dispatcher with Texas Fire Department said the explosion happened on Wednesday night.

Tommy Muska, West's mayor, said buildings in a five-block radius from the plant were severely damaged by the explosion.

Hillcrest Baptist Medical Center in Waco reported treating 66 patients, including children, for injuries including lacerations, burns and broken bones.

"We are seeing a lot of lacerations and orthopaedic-type injuries ... things you would expect in an explosion," said David Argueta, vice president of hospital operations.

He said nine people suffering burns had been transferred to the Parkland Hospital in Dallas. A third hospital, Providence Health Center, reported receiving more than 30 patients from the disaster.

Residences leveled

A senior official said the nursing home and much of the centre of town had been evacuated, and that residences near the explosion had been levelled.

The air in town remained thick with smoke more than two hours after the explosion, and the area around the blast site was littered with shards of wood, bricks and glass.

Governor Rick Perry issued a statement saying his office had "mobilised state resources to help local authorities" deal with the incident.

"We are monitoring developments and gathering information as details continue to emerge about this incident," the statement said.

A White House official said the Obama administration was aware of the situation and monitoring local and state response through the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Gayle Scarbrough, a spokeswoman for the Department of Public Safety in Waco, told television station KWTX that DPS troopers have been transporting the injured to hospitals in their patrol cars.

She said six helicopters were also en route.