

Pemex gas pipelines hit by explosions

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MEXICO CITY — Six explosions believed to be the work of saboteurs ripped apart natural gas pipelines for Mexico's state oil monopoly early Monday, sparking fires and prompting authorities to evacuate thousands of people and shut down two highways.

The blasts reverberated for miles. No direct injuries were reported, though civil defence agencies reported that two women in their 70s who lived nearby died of heart attacks shortly afterward.

The six blasts, which occurred on at least four pipelines, happened about 2 a.m. in the Gulf coast state of Veracruz, the Mexican state oil monopoly Petroleos Mexicanos, or Pemex, said in a statement. The company immediately shut down the lines affected as well as an extra line in the area as a precaution.

Flames from the fires could be seen up to six miles away, said Pedro Jimenez, a resident who was packing his family into a truck to leave. "You could see the fields of crops lit up."

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Dozens of families lined roadways to evacuate to local shelters.

Pemex said domestic gas and gasoline service would not be affected.

At four sections of the pipelines, fires broke out, while at two others leaking gas prompted fears of explosions and forced civil protection authorities to evacuate several communities including Ciudad Cardel and Antigua, said state Civil Protection Deputy Director Ranulfo Marquez.

The explosions also prompted authorities to close two main highways.

"We still have a gas leak in the area of Ciudad Cardel," Mr. Marquez said. "There is still a risk."

Authorities also were checking to see if any gas had leaked into the Chiquito River, near the city of Nogales, Nogales Mayor Marcelo Aguilar said.

Starting Sunday evening, residents reported smelling gas from the pipelines.

The explosions could be felt up to 12 miles away, Mr. Marquez said.

A small, left-wing guerrilla group known as the People's Revolutionary Army, or EPR, claimed to have attacked a major Pemex gas pipeline in July, forcing at least a dozen major companies, including Honda Motor Co., Kellogg Co. and The Hershey Co., to suspend or scale back operations.

The July explosions affected sections of a major pipeline extending from central Mexico City to Guadalajara in western Mexico.

Those attacks sent the Mexican government scrambling to increase security at "strategic installations" across Mexico. It was not clear what security measures were in place at the pipelines that exploded Monday.

Mexico is a major oil producer and exporter, with oil and related taxes accounting for over a third of the federal government's revenue. The U.S. imported 12.7 million cubic feet of natural gas from Mexico in 2006, about 0.3 per cent of total imports that year.

Natural gas futures rose 5.5 cents to \$5.56 per 1,000 cubic feet in late morning trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange after initially rising more than 20 cents on news of the explosions. Mexico's stocks opened lower amid the reports of sabotage.

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