

At least 60 killed in Haitian fuel tanker explosion

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The explosion in Cap-Haitien, Haiti's second-largest city, occurred as the Caribbean nation is struggling with widespread fuel shortages and spiralling gas prices [Reuters]

Port-au-Prince, December 14 (RHC)-- At least 60 people have been killed and dozens more injured after a truck carrying fuel exploded in the northern Haitian city of Cap-Haitien, prompting local officials and health authorities to plead for supplies and staff to help treat the victims.

The explosion occurred late on Monday in Haiti's second-largest city, on the country's northern coast, where survivors rushed outside and yelled as they observed how the fire consumed part of their neighborhood. "We have now counted 60 deaths," Deputy Mayor Patrick Almonor said, adding that authorities were still searching for victims amid the charred debris.

According to Almonor, it appeared the truck driver lost control as it swerved to avoid a motorcycle taxi and the tanker flipped over. He said fuel spilled on the road and pedestrians rushed to collect the fuel.

More than 100 people were reported injured in the explosion that also burned about 20 homes near the site, Almonor said, adding that the number of deaths is expected to keep rising because people who died in their homes have not yet been counted. "It's horrible what happened," he said. "We lost so many lives."

The incident occurred as Haiti is struggling with widespread fuel shortages and spiralling gas prices, caused in part by armed gangs that have set up blockades at fuel terminals in the capital, Port-au-Prince, and surrounding areas.

Gang violence and political instability have skyrocketed in Haiti following the July assassination of President Jovenel Moise. The country has also struggled to rebuild in the aftermath of a devastating, 7.2-magnitude earthquake in August.

As rescue workers cleaned up in the aftermath of the explosion in Cap-Haitien on Tuesday, bodies covered in white sheets lay on the ground before they were loaded on to trucks to be taken away. Haitian Prime Minister Ariel Henry said the explosion had left dozens injured.

"Three days of national mourning will be decreed throughout the territory, in memory of the victims of this tragedy that has devastated the entire Haitian nation," Henry wrote on Twitter. He added that field hospitals would be set up in Cap-Haitien to care for the victims.

The nearby Justinien University Hospital was overwhelmed with patients as those injured were transported to the facility. "We don't have the ability to treat the number of seriously burned people," a nurse told the AFP news agency. "I'm afraid we won't be able to save them all."

Mayor Pierre Yvrose described the situation as "critical" and called for additional resources. "We need human resources, and also material resources, namely, serum, gauze, and anything that can be used in case of serious burns," Yvrose said.

Haiti has never produced enough electricity to meet the needs of the whole population. Even in well-off parts of the capital, the state-run Haiti electric utility provides, at most, only a few hours of power a day. Those who can afford it rely on pricey generators, which are no help in the face of the severe fuel shortage caused by gangs blocking access to the country's oil terminals.

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