Beat: News

Gas explosion kills 2, injures 184 at Florida jail

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USPA News - A suspected gas explosion tore through a four-story jail complex in northwestern Florida on late Wednesday evening, killing two inmates and injuring more than 180 others, authorities said on Thursday, indicating the leak may have been caused by earlier flood damage. The incident happened at approximately 11 p.m. local time on Wednesday when an explosion occurred in the rear of the first floor, said Escambia County Sheriff David Morgan.

He said the blast destroyed much of the first floor, causing a partial building collapse, and added that the entire four-story building was probably a total loss. Roughly 600 prisoners were in the building at the time of the explosion, but most were unharmed and moved to other detention facilities in Escambia County and neighboring Santa Rosa County. Rescue workers later recovered the bodies of two inmates, and three people who were initially unaccounted for were later said to be safe. County spokesman Bill Pearson said a total of 184 inmates and corrections officers were injured, but only two male inmates and one corrections officer remained hospitalized by late Thursday. Their conditions were not immediately known, but the vast majority of other injuries were said to be minor. "West Florida Hospital received 39 patients in the Emergency Room starting just after midnight this morning," said West Florida Healthcare spokesman Kendrick Doidge. "All 39 have been treated for minor injuries such as scrapes, bruises and strains and have been released from the hospital. None of them had to be admitted." Families of inmates at the facility heavily criticized county officials for a lack of information, with one angry relative confronting Morgan at a news conference. "I`ve called and your officers are being rude. They`re being disrespectful," said Sheila Travis, who interrupted the sheriff`s news conference. Travis added: "My son has not been accounted for. How do you think the family members are feeling that their kids are not accounted for? And I`ve seen more than two body bags come out of there. ... Nobody can`t tell me anything about my son, and now you show up looking nice for the media. My son, good or bad in jail, he has family members who love him. ... You have not called or returned our phone calls." Other relatives were told to go to a nearby cafeteria for more information, but officials never showed up. "You can give us something. Let us know if he`s hurt or if he`s deceased. Give us something other than the waiting game," one relative, looking for her brother, told WTLV-TV. "We were instructed to come here by the authorities." The State Fire Marshall and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) were participating in the investigation into the cause of Wednesday`s explosion, which officials described as an apparent gas explosion that may have been the result of flooding. They said the building`s first floor suffered flood damage in the day before the accident, causing a retention wall to collapse.

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