

More than 31 dead in an explosion at a fireworks market in Mexico

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 12.22.16

Word Count **820**



This image made from video recorded from a passing car shows an explosion ripping through the San Pablito fireworks' market in Tultepec, Mexico, Tuesday, Dec. 20, 2016. Photo: Jose Luis Tolentino via AP

TULTEPEC, Mexico — The San Pablito fireworks market was especially well stocked for the holidays and bustling with hundreds of shoppers on Tuesday when a powerful chain-reaction explosion ripped through its stalls, killing at least 31 people and leaving dozens more badly burned.

A staccato of bangs and flashes of light lit up a towering plume of smoke. Once the smoke cleared, all that was left of the open-air market was ash, rubble and the charred metal of fireworks stands, casting gloom over the country's Christmas season. This is the third blast since 2005 in the market, which sits on the northern outskirts of Mexico's capital.

Authorities have not yet said what may have caused the explosions.

Government health officials said about 60 people were hospitalized for injuries from Tuesday's explosion, including for severe burns.

Thunderous Explosions At The Market

Crescencia Francisco Garcia said she was at the market in the middle of the grid of stalls when the thunderous explosions began. She froze, reflexively looked up at the sky and then took off running through the smoke once she realized everyone was doing so. As she ran, she saw people with burns and cuts.

"Everything was catching fire. Everything was exploding," Francisco said. "The stones were flying, pieces of brick, everything was flying."

Sirens wailed and a heavy scent of gunpowder lingered in the air well after the thunderous explosions at the market, which were widely seen after being captured in a dramatic video. The smoking, burned-out shells of vehicles ringed the perimeter, as emergency workers and local residents wearing blue masks over their mouths combed through the ash and debris. Firefighters hosed down still-smoldering hot spots.

Cesar Ornelas from the city of Atizapan de Zaragoza was only 10 minutes into shopping with his son and his father when he heard the first explosions. He tried to run, but something knocked him to the ground from behind. He tried several times to get up, unsuccessfully, and ultimately his 15-year-old son Francisco had to drag him out.

People Ran In An Attempt To Escape

"We didn't look back," said Ornelas, who suffered light burns and a large bruise over his left kidney. His white tank top had a fist-size burn on the chest. "We heard how the explosion was kind of going off bit by bit."

Nearly four hours later, he and Francisco limped gingerly out of the market area. Francisco said paramedics told him his leg was likely fractured by flying debris. Ornelas said his 67-year-old father, Ernesto, had run in a different direction and found safety from the explosions in a nearby home. All of the father's clothing was burned, and his face and arm were bloodied. An ambulance took him to a hospital, but Ornelas wasn't sure where it was or how serious his father's injuries were.

Tultepec Mayor Armando Portuguez Fuentes said the manufacture and sale of fireworks is a key part of the local economy. He added that it is regulated by law and under the "constant supervision" of the Defense Department, which oversees firearms and explosives.

Townpeople's Livelihood Depends On Fireworks

"This is part of the activity of our town. It is what gives us identity," Portuguez said of fireworks. "We know it is high-risk, we regret this greatly, but unfortunately many people's livelihoods depend on this activity."

For Juana Antolina Hernandez, 49, the fireworks market was the family business, passed on from generation to generation. Hernandez has run a stand for 22 years next to one operated by her parents.

On Wednesday, Hernandez was one of the sobbing residents waiting outside the local morgue, where bodies are examined, looking for missing relatives.

"I can't find my father, and my mother is very badly burned," said Hernandez. "I am waiting here (at the morgue) for them to tell me if my father is here, but up to this point, nothing."

Deadly Fireworks Explosions Are Not Unusual In Mexico

"Everything is gone," she said of the market, which she escaped in a mad dash when the explosions began. "I know we lost everything, but I am going to start over."

A similar fire engulfed the San Pablito Market in 2005, touching off a chain of explosions that destroyed hundreds of stalls right before Mexico's Independence Day holiday. A year later, a similar accident at the same market also destroyed hundreds of stands.

Deadly fireworks explosions have occurred with some regularity in Mexico. In 2002, a blast at a market in the Gulf coast city of Veracruz killed 29; in 1999, 63 people died when an explosion of illegally stored fireworks destroyed part of the city of Celaya; and in 1988, a fireworks blast in Mexico City's La Merced market killed at least 68 people.

In an editorial Wednesday, the newspaper El Universal called it "the traditional tragedy," noting "our country's fascination with fireworks has caused, among other things, a long series of accidents with terrible results."

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following sentences from the article shows why people in Mexico continue to sell fireworks?
- (A) Government health officials said about 60 people were hospitalized for injuries from Tuesday's explosion, including for severe burns.
 - (B) "We didn't look back," said Ornelas, who suffered light burns and a large bruise over his left kidney.
 - (C) "We know it is high-risk, we regret this greatly, but unfortunately many people's livelihoods depend on this activity."
 - (D) Deadly fireworks explosions have occurred with some regularity in Mexico.

- 2 How does the section "Thunderous Explosions At The Market" contribute to the central idea of the article?
- (A) It shows how people who witnessed the explosion at the market will most likely never return to buy fireworks.
 - (B) It provides details about the extent of damage brought upon by the explosion at the market.
 - (C) It highlights how the people came together to help locate the remaining survivors.
 - (D) It explains the lack of safety precautions at marketplaces where fireworks are commonly sold.

- 3 Read the following paragraph from the section "Thunderous Explosions At The Market."

Sirens wailed and a heavy scent of gunpowder lingered in the air well after the thunderous explosions at the market, which were widely seen after being captured in a dramatic video.

Which statement can be inferred from this paragraph?

- (A) The video may contain evidence behind the causes of the explosion at the marketplace.
- (B) The police and fire department readily came to the rescue after the explosion.
- (C) The explosion was a destructive event, and its aftermath will be felt by many in San Pablito.
- (D) A reporter was present at the market and managed to capture a video of the explosion.

- 4 Which idea is LEAST important to include in a summary of the article?
- (A) The Mexican Defense Department plays a role in managing fireworks.
 - (B) The explosion caused many deaths and injuries.
 - (C) Many people in Mexico depend on the fireworks business for their livelihood.
 - (D) Accidents due to fireworks happen frequently in Mexico.