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Massive explosions rock Florida propane plant (PHOTOS, VIDEO)

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A series of gas explosions at a LP tank exchange plant in Lake County, Florida has injured at least 7 people. Witnesses said vibrations from the powerful blasts could be felt several towns over.

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The series of explosions began at about 10:30 p.m. local time. According to the Orlando Sentinel, witnesses compared the sound to fireworks or loud shotgun fire. Apparently the initial blasts completely destroyed the two large LP storage tanks, which the plant used to refill smaller backyard tanks.

"I heard a loud bomb sound," said Lisa Garner, who lives nearby in the Tavares subdivision of Lakeside. *"I thought somebody ran into my house."*

A night shift crew of 24 to 26 people was at the plant when the explosions started, according to Lt. John Herrell, a Lake County Sheriff's Office spokesman. All of them have been accounted for, although there is slight chance that somebody was present at the facility without the management knowing about it he said.

Seven crew members injured in the incident have been transported to hospital while two or three others sought out medical treatment on their own accord. The others escaped the explosions unharmed, Herrell said.

Authorities announced a mile-radius evacuation following reports of the plant fire. The evacuation zone was reduced to a half-mile radius hours later. No injuries were reported outside of the propane plant. Residents of roughly 50 homes were affected by the evacuation.

An Orlando Regional Medical Center spokesperson confirmed three burn victims from Blue Rhino had been admitted in critical condition.

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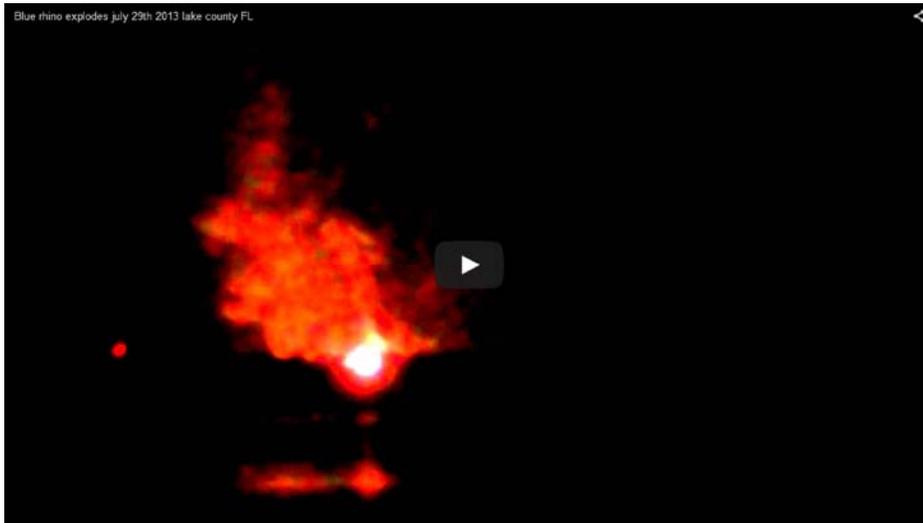
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The massive blaze continued to rage at the facility for at least three hours after the initial explosions. Live footage broadcast by WESH Orlando showed about a dozen trailers storing LP tanks engulfed by the inferno.

Additional explosions were sporadically occurring as individual cylinders blew up due to heat from the fire, sending shrapnel flying. The facility is believed to hold some 53,000 20-gallon tanks in total, according to police.

Firefighters had to keep their distance from the site, limiting their ability to prevent the fire from spreading to the wooded area surrounding Blue Rhino, as it was unsafe for them to approach the plant.



The initial blasts may have been sparked by someone filling their own propane tank when a leak ignited, although police told the Orlando Sentinel that information is unconfirmed.

Blue Rhino, the tank-exchange business, where the explosions took place, moved to Tavares approximately seven years ago. The company is headquartered in North Carolina. County road 448 was closed roughly three miles east.





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