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**HEADLINE:** Acetylene Gas Blast in Perth Amboy Kills Three

**BYLINE:** By DAMIEN CAVE and JOHN HOLL; Margot Williams contributed reporting for this article.

**DATELINE:** PERTH AMBOY, N.J., Jan. 25

### **BODY:**

Three men were killed and another critically injured in an industrial gas explosion on Tuesday that destroyed part of a warehouse, briefly blackened the sky near an industrial area here known as "the chemical coastline," and could be heard miles away.

The victims were moving **acetylene**, a highly flammable fuel used in welding torches, from large canisters to small ones at a loading dock of the **Acetylene** Service Company on State Street when the blast occurred at 10:43 a.m., said Larry Cattano, the Perth Amboy fire chief.

Two workers, Enio Perez, 34, and Pablo Morillo, 29, were killed instantly. Another, German Gonzalez Vasquez, 46, was airlifted to University Hospital in Newark, where he died soon afterward. Each was killed, said Mr. Cattano, by the trauma of the blast. None were burned, including Jiovai Pena Gomez, who was injured in the blast and was in critical condition last night at Robert Wood Johnson Medical Center in New Brunswick.

Victims' relatives, many of them screaming and crying as they gathered at the scene, said on Tuesday that the tragedy highlighted the harsh dangers faced daily by the site's 14 employees. Fear of catastrophe among the workers is ever-present, they said, but because acetylene jobs pay more than retail or factory work, many choose to toil with the risk.

Joselito Perez, 21, said that his brother Enio took the job after his wife died in 1999, leaving him to care for five children ages 6 to 11. The danger, he said, mattered less than the payoff.

"He was a person who was working hard to get a better life for him and his kids," Mr. Perez said. "He worked hard every day, then on the weekends he did the laundry and food shopping and he'd buy the kids toys and clothes."

Mr. Morillo, who would have turned 30 on Wednesday, had family concerns, too. Stephen Morillo, who appeared at the scene with other victims' family members, said that his little brother was expecting a baby with his new wife, Wanda.

All the technicians and employees "risk their lives to work there every day," said Mr. Morillo, who worked at the plant until 1997. "The pay is good, but it's dangerous."

As of 4:45 p.m. on Tuesday, the scene was under control. The bodies of those who died remained on the ground, while those not critically injured were taken to local hospitals for treatment of emotional trauma. Part of the 200-by-200-foot building had been destroyed, and fire officials ruled it condemned.

The damage, however, could have been worse. Three truck beds filled with about 150 acetylene canisters each stood nearby, intact. Chief Cattano said that the building's sprinkler system worked well, and when fire officials arrived on the scene, no flames could be seen.

The cause of the blast, he said, remains under investigation. Karen Hershey, a spokeswoman for the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, said that preliminary evidence pointed to a leak from the hoses that connected one of the large canisters to a smaller cylinder.

But the gas, which is used welding torches and carries a slight odor of garlic, requires little to explode. According to the United States Department of Labor, "The static charge developed by walking across a carpet floor on a dry day can be 1,700 times greater than that needed to ignite acetylene."

Companies handling the fuel are monitored by a quilt of federal and state government agencies.

Officials with Acetylene Service, whose parent company, Acetylene Supply Company of Woodbridge, brings in about \$6 million a year, did not return calls seeking comment Tuesday.

The company's facilities have been inspected three times in the past eight years by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

In each case, there were violations, and the company paid fines that a representative of the agency described as "less than significant."

After an inspection in February 1996, the company paid \$5,850 in penalties for 17 violations, including one related to equipment maintenance.

"We cited them for not establishing written procedures to maintain the integrity of their process equipment," said Robert D. Kulik, area director for OSHA. "In other words, one of the components -- storage tanks, piping, valves, relief and vent systems, emergency shutdown systems, -- were deficient, or there was no written procedure for maintaining them."

Later that year, the company paid \$600 for violations related to their written safety procedures, and March 2002, the company paid \$563 for a problem with the use of a confined space.

"It's not clear whether any of these violations were related to what caused the explosion today," Mr. Kulik said.

For those who live and work near the site, the explosion provided a sudden reminder of acetylene's chemical force. Only a few months ago, in October, Giles Lison, 27, was killed when a leaky cylinder of the fuel exploded in the back seat of his Volkswagen while he was driving on Hackensack Road in Weehawken, N.J. Miguel Taveras, who works at an auto repair shop across the street on State Street, said Tuesday's fatal blast felt like an earthquake. "The ground shook and I saw debris flying through the air, then I felt the wind blast, wind pressure. It was powerful."

**URL:** <http://www.nytimes.com>

**GRAPHIC:** Photos: A distraught Stephen Morillo, outside the industrial site in Perth Amboy, N.J., where an explosion killed three men. His brother, Pablo, was among the victims. (Photographs by Associated Press)(pg. B1)  
A police officer with a man who thought that a relative might have been hurt in the explosion. (Photo by Frank C. Dougherty for The New York Times)(pg. B5)

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