

25 killed, 1,000 injured in huge Iran port blast

AFP- Fires were still blazing on Sunday after a massive explosion tore through Iran's largest commercial port the day before, killing at least 25 people and leaving 1,000 others injured, according to state media.

The blast occurred Saturday at Shahid Rajaei Port in southern Iran, near the Strait of Hormuz, through which a fifth of world oil output passes.

The port's customs office said in a statement carried by state television that the explosion probably resulted from a fire that broke out at the hazardous and chemical materials storage depot. A regional emergency official said several containers had exploded.

The New York Times quoted a person with ties to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss security matters, as saying that what exploded was sodium perchlorate – a major ingredient in solid fuel for missiles.

Iranian state TV gave an updated toll on Sunday of 25 people killed and 1,000 injured, with thick black smoke still visible in live footage from the scene.

"The fire is under control but still not out," a state TV correspondent reported from the site around 20 hours after the blast.

Citing local emergency services, state TV reported that hundreds of casualties "have been transferred to nearby medical centres", while the provincial blood transfusion centre issued a call for donations.

– Blood-stained car –

The explosion was so powerful that it was felt and heard about 50 kilometres (30 miles) away, Fars news agency reported.

Speaking Sunday at the scene, Interior Minister Eskandar Momeni said that “the situation has stabilised in the main areas” of the port.

He told state TV that workers had resumed loading containers and customs clearance.

Images from news agency IRNA on Saturday showed rescuers and survivors walking along a wide boulevard carpeted with debris after the blast at Shahid Rajaei, more than 1,000 kilometres south of Tehran.

Flames could be seen engulfing a truck trailer and blood stained the side of a crushed car, while a helicopter dropped water on massive black smoke clouds billowing from behind stacked shipping containers.

“The shockwave was so strong that most of the port buildings were severely damaged,” Tasnim news agency reported.

The authorities have closed off the roads leading to the site of the explosion, and footage from the area has been limited to Iranian media outlets.

With choking smoke and air pollution spreading throughout the area, all schools and offices in Bandar Abbas, the nearby capital of Hormozgan province, have been ordered closed on Sunday to allow authorities to focus on the emergency effort, state TV said.

The health ministry urged residents to avoid going outside “until further notice” and to use protective masks.

– Mourning –

Saturday is the start of the working week in Iran, meaning the port would have been busy with employees.

Three Chinese nationals were “lightly injured”, China’s state broadcaster CCTV reported, citing its Bandar Abbas consulate.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian expressed sympathy for the victims of the deadly blast, adding he had “issued an order to investigate the situation and the causes”.

The United Arab Emirates expressed “solidarity with Iran” over the explosion and Saudi Arabia sent condolences, as did Pakistan, India, Turkey and the United Nations.

Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his “deepest condolences for the loss of life and extensive damage”, and offered to send help in a message to Iran’s leaders.

Authorities declared three days of public mourning across Hormozgan province.

The explosion came as Iranian and US delegations met in Oman for high-level talks on Tehran’s nuclear programme, with both sides reporting progress.

While Iranian authorities so far appear to be treating the blast as an accident, it also comes against the backdrop of years of shadow war with regional foe Israel.

According to the Washington Post, Israel in 2020 launched a cyberattack targeting the Shahid Rajaei Port.

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