

Blasts hit downtown



Smoke pours from manholes between Queen and Merchant streets as Honolulu firefighters investigate the downtown explosions.

Photo by Craig T. Kojima, Star-Bulletin

Smoke boils from manholes; power lost; at least two hurt

By Star-Bulletin staff

Underground explosions at Merchant and Richards streets today sent flames and black smoke pouring from downtown manholes, causing mayhem downtown with power outages to most buildings in the area, traffic blockages and underground fires.

At least two women were at Straub Hospital: A 47-year-old taken there by ambulance is in stable condition with burns, abrasions and a concussion; another female, 38, who walked in on her own accord also was stable.

Police cleared pedestrians off sidewalks and closed Queen and Richards streets, rerouting traffic onto King Street.

The first explosion, which occurred around 11 this morning, blew off the cover of a manhole near the rear of the downtown post office. Witnesses said they heard a series of explosions.

"I saw a manhole flying in the air for about 30 feet," said Calvin Ung, a state social worker.

Police ordered people to stay away from manholes, and the state's hazardous materials team was sent out. Ambulances, firetrucks, Hawaiian Electric Co. and Hawaiian Telephone Co. trucks were at the scene.

Trish Lawson said she heard three blasts about 11 a.m. on Queen Street, turned the corner onto Richards to find a manhole cover off and black smoke pouring out - then heard another three explosions.

Businesses blocks away heard several explosions at about 11:10 a.m.

"The initial one was really loud," said Donne Soga, at The Gift Box, 333A Queen St. "Several followed."

She said the power was out briefly and restored although the elevator still wasn't working at about 11:30 a.m.

"We heard three or four explosions," said Ninette Sumagaysay, in the Melim Building at 333 Queen St.

Manley Chan at Apcoa Inc., 345 Queen St., said a manhole cover apparently blew off while workmen were inside.



Fire comes from a manhole on Richards Street this morning.

Photo by Craig T. Kojima, Star-Bulletin

Ambulances, firetrucks, Hawaiian Electric Co. and Hawaiian Telephone Co. trucks were at the scene.

The 11 a.m. explosion at the intersection of Richards and Merchant streets occurred after an underground Hawaiian Electric cable shorted and apparently caught fire, said Chuck Freedman, spokesman for Hawaiian Electric Co.

Two manhole covers were blown off and witnesses reported seeing flames - some as high as 20 feet. Heco cut off power to about half of the downtown area as a precaution. They say no electrical work was going on in the area, Freedman said.

The explosions occurred in a domino fashion, said a Heco spokeswoman.

Stafford Kiguchi, BHP spokesman, which owns The Gas Co., said a team sent to check for hydrocarbon leaks found nothing immediately after the explosion.

The company has two pipelines running synthetic natural gas, one on King Street parallel to Merchant Street, the other at Queen Street.

Shortly after the explosion, firefighters were testing explosive gas levels in manholes.

"We want to make sure that a manhole doesn't blow like this one," said firefighter Walter Oda.

Firefighters got a reading of gas in front of a manhole cover at Iolani Palace but it was vented, and the gas company and Heco checked it and said it was fine, he said.

Among buildings effected were the state Capitol, the federal building and the Keeikolani Building on Punchbowl.

Larry Davis, his wife and two children were walking into the American Savings Bank building on Richards Street when the explosion occurred.

He said dark gray smoke was coming from an electrical box. Thirty seconds later, from inside the bank, he heard a big explosion. Two steel plates on the ground - about 1 1/2 by 3 feet - were lifted about 15 feet into the air, and black smoke began pouring out with foot-high flames, he said.

At Richards and Merchant streets a few minutes later, another explosion lifted a manhole cover 30 feet before it landed in the middle of the road, split in half.

Davis ran into the street and warned people to stay away from the manhole covers.

"It was a loud explosion. I felt it. It rung my bell," Davis said.

A woman walking past the manhole cover was thrown to the ground when it exploded, he said.

Ben Villaflor, Senate sergeant at arms, said everything in the state Capitol was down - computers, elevators - at about 11:20 a.m. He and other Capitol employees were walking around with flashlights.

U.S. Postal Service spokeswoman Felice Broglio said downtown station was closed this morning at around 11:30 a.m.

No one was hurt in post office.

Broglio said witnesses in the area said they saw "a manhole cover flew 30 feet into the area." The post office will remain closed until given clearance by the police.

Keanu Sai, supervisor of the title search department of Perfect Title Co. on the sixth floor at 850 Richards St., said he was working on a report when the lights began to flash. "and then all of a sudden we heard this boom and the shock waves shook the whole building."

Employees looked out the window and saw black smoke billowing so they decided to evacuate because he didn't know if the building was on fire.

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