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Smoke billows from behind the main plant of the Imperial Sugar Company during a fire at the plant on the Savannah River Thursday Feb. 7, 2008 in Port Wentworth, Ga. An explosion and fire at a sprawling sugar refinery rattled this Savannah suburb Thursday night, severely injuring dozens of people and sending authorities into a nearby river to search for possible victims, officials said. (AP Photo/Stephen Morton)



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6 Missing After Ga. Refinery Blast

By RUSS BYNUM – 2 hours ago

PORT WENTWORTH, Ga. (AP) — Firefighters were battling flames early Friday after an explosion and fire at a sugar dust refinery injured dozens of people and left six missing.

Officials had not determined what caused the explosion Thursday night but said they suspect sugar dust, which can be volatile.

The fire had been partially contained early Friday, but still was not under control, said Capt. Matthew Stanley of the Savannah Fire Department. "We have diminished it considerably, but we're still struggling to get to parts of it," he said.

The blast was felt by residents throughout the Savannah suburb. No deaths were immediately reported, but six people remained unaccounted for hours later, said Chief Michael Berkow of the Savannah-Chatham County police.

There were 95 to 100 people believed to be working in the area of the explosion, Berkow said. At least 40 people were taken to hospitals, and some of them were airlifted to a burn center in Augusta, 130 miles up the Savannah River, he said.

Authorities were talking with the military about bringing in Chinook helicopters to dump water on the fire, Stanley said.

The blaze had been extinguished in the area where the explosion occurred, but structural damage was still keeping firefighters out, Stanley said.

The plant is owned by Imperial Sugar and is known in Savannah as the Dixie Crystals plant.

"As far as we know, it was a sugar dust explosion," Imperial Sugar CEO John Sheptor said. He said it happened in a storage silo where refined sugar is stored until it is packaged.

"There was fire all over the building," said Nakishya Hill, a machine operator who said she escaped from the third floor of the refinery on the Savannah River.

"All I know is, I heard a loud boom and everything came down," said Hill, who was uninjured except for blisters on her elbow. "All I could do when I got down was take off running."

Six people had been brought to the Augusta burn center by early Friday, but a total of 18 were expected, spokeswoman Beth Frits said. All were in critical condition, she said.

Twenty-six others were at two Savannah hospitals, most in severe condition, officials said.

Coast Guard Lt. Cmdr. Kevin Lynn said the river was closed to ship traffic from the Port of Savannah while the river was searched for possible victims. None had been found.

"It's a large facility, and there is still a significant amount of fire," said Clayton Scott, assistant director of Chatham County Emergency Management Agency. He described the refinery as covering an area the size of a Super Wal-Mart.

Sugar dust is considered a combustible dust, according the U.S. Occupational Safety & Health Administration's Web site. Static electricity, sparks from metal tools or a cigarette can ignite explosions. Sugar dust is suspected of sparking a nonfatal explosion last summer at a factory in Scottsbluff, Neb., and one that killed a worker in Omaha, Neb., in 1996.

Imperial Sugar, based in Sugar Land, Texas, acquired Savannah Foods & Industries, the producer of Dixie Crystals, in 1997. The acquisition doubled the size of the company, making it the largest processor and refiner of sugar in the U.S., according to the company's Web site.

Imperial markets some of the country's leading consumer brands, Imperial, Dixie Crystals and Holly, as well as supplying sugar and sweetener products to industrial food manufacturers.

On the Net:

- Imperial Sugar: <http://www.imperialsugar.com>