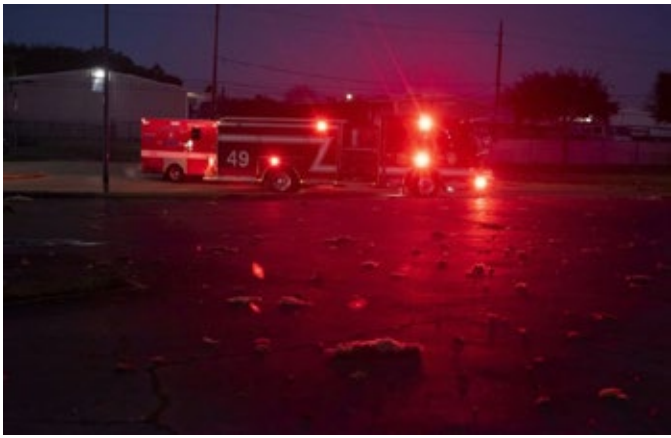


world

Large explosion rocks Houston, houses damaged



Firefighters and emergency services arrive at a scene of a reported explosion in Houston, Texas

AFP | Houston

A large explosion shook the US city of Houston, Texas, early on Friday morning, with shocked residents woken before dawn as houses were badly damaged and glass windows blown in.

The Houston Fire Department said one person had been taken to hospital as firefighters, emergency services and police rushed to the scene.

Police described the incident as a “building explosion” and warned all traffic to avoid the area in the northwest of the city.

CNN said that the blast erupted at about 4:15 am, adding that it had reportedly occurred at a grinding and manufacturing business 18 miles (29 kilometers) northwest of downtown Houston.

Security camera video footage appeared to show a huge blast and a fireball rising into the air.

Details about what exploded, the cause and whether anyone was seriously injured were not immediately confirmed.

“This is still an active scene. Avoid the area. No evacuation order given at this time,” city fire chief Samuel Pena tweeted.

“We will advise of the possible cause of the explosion as soon as we have concrete info.”

Nearly every house in the area had extensive damage,

including shattered windows and damaged garage doors, the local KPRC 2 TV news channel reported on its website.

‘It’s a warzone’

“(The explosion) knocked us all out of our bed, it was so strong,” resident Mark Brady told KPRC.

“It busted out every window in our house. It busted everybody’s garage door in around here... and closer toward the explosion over here, it busted people’s roofs in and walls in and we don’t know what it is... It’s a warzone over here.”

Brady said the explosion was extremely loud.

“This is a disaster,” he said. “This is a big disaster. I really don’t know what happened... Houston we could use your prayers.”

Another resident named only as Kim said: “The whole house is ruined.

“The whole ceiling crashed down on all of us. We were all trapped in there and a nice family came and helped up out. It’s trashed. It’s just trashed.

“Every house was devastated.”

One resident told CNN affiliate KTRK that “the whole ceiling fell in” at her home.

“I thought maybe the house had gotten hit by lightning. And then I realized there was no storm,” the resident told KTRK. “No one can figure out what happened.”

China shuts down 13 cities

China shuts part of Great Wall, Forbidden City and Disneyland as virus toll hits 26

AFP | Beijing

Chinese authorities rapidly expanded a mammoth quarantine effort aimed at containing a deadly contagion on Friday to 13 cities and a staggering 41 million people, as nervous residents were checked for fevers and the death toll climbed to 26.

While the World Health Organization (WHO) held off on declaring a global emergency despite confirmed cases in half a dozen other countries, China expanded its lockdown to cover an area with a total population greater than Canada’s.

A range of Lunar New Year festivities have been cancelled, while temporary closures of Beijing’s Forbidden City, Shanghai’s Disneyland and a section of the Great Wall were announced to prevent the disease from spreading further.

The previously unknown virus has caused alarm because of its similarity to SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), which killed hundreds across mainland China and Hong Kong in 2002-2003.

The WHO said China faced a national emergency but stopped short of making a declaration that would have prompted greater global cooperation.

The outbreak emerged in late December in Wuhan, an industrial and transport hub of 11 million people in China’s centre, spreading to several other countries including the United States.

China is in the midst of its Lunar New Year holiday, a typically joyous time of family gatherings and public festivities.

But on Friday Wuhan was a ghost town, its streets deserted and stores shuttered.

Worried patients

Hospitals visited by journalists bustled with worried patients being screened by staff wearing full-body protective suits.

At a temperature-check station, a medical staffer in bodysuit, face mask and goggles took a thermometer from a



Passengers wearing protective facemasks are checked by security personnel wearing hazardous material suits at the entrance to the underground train station in Beijing



Authorities in Beijing have cancelled massive gatherings that usually attract throngs during the New Year holiday

middle-aged woman, pausing to examine the reading before quickly turning back to the patient.

“Have you registered? Then go and see the doctor,” the staffer said.

One 35-year-old man surprised Li voiced the fears of many.

“I have a fever and cough, so I’m worried that I’m infected,” he said.

“I don’t know the results yet.” With hundreds of millions of people on the move across

China for the holiday, the government has halted all travel out of Wuhan, shut down its public transport and told residents to stay home. Deepening the isolation, there were few flights available to the city.

“This year we have a very scary Chinese New Year. People are not going outside because of the virus,” a taxi driver in the city, who asked not to be named, told AFP.

But he said a prolonged shutdown should not pose food-shortage problems because many Chinese had stocked up for the holiday.

Besides Wuhan, 12 other smaller cities nearby have battened down the hatches, with most of them going public on Friday with various measures ranging from closing public venues and restricting large gatherings to halting public transportation and asking citizens not to leave their cities.

Several of the cities have populations numbering several million, led by Huanggang, which has 7.5 million.

The pathogen -- 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) -- has

caused many outlets in Shanghai, Beijing and other cities to sell out their stocks of face masks.

As reports surfaced of bed shortages in Wuhan hospitals, state media said authorities were rushing to build a new facility devoted to the outbreak in a mind-blowing 10 days.

The Wuhan hospital is targeted to be ready by February 3. Dozens of excavators and trucks were filmed working on the site by state television.

State broadcaster CCTV also reported that 40 medical doctors from the military were being brought in to help with intensive care.

In addition, 405 medical workers were being sent to Wuhan from Shanghai, said state news agency Xinhua, with the first set of 135 flying in Friday night.

On Friday, staff in full body protective suits were seen checking the temperatures of people entering a subway station in Beijing.

Thermal cameras scanned passengers arriving at Beijing’s West Railway Station.

Philippines’ Duterte threatens to end US military pact

AFP | Manila

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has threatened to end a pact key to annual war games with American troops if the US does not restore the travel visa of an official who oversaw his drug war.

It is the latest in a long line of Duterte’s threats to shrink or sever ties with historical ally Washington, which have periodically followed criticism of his deadly narcotics crackdown.

Duterte spoke after Ronald Dela Rosa, the former national police chief who is now a senator, said the US had cancelled his visa but did not tell him why.

Dela Rosa was the first enforcer of Duterte’s internationally condemned campaign, in which police say they have killed just over 5,500 alleged dealers and users.

Human rights advocates say the true toll is four times higher, and could amount to crimes against humanity.

The US State Department and the embassy in Manila have not responded to requests for comment about Dela Rosa’s visa.

Duterte went on the attack in a speech late Thursday.

“Now, they won’t let Bato go to America”, he said, using Dela Rosa’s nickname.

“If you do not make a cor-



Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte holds a Galil sniper rifle with outgoing Philippine National Police (PNP) chief Ronald dela Rosa (L)

rection there, one, I will terminate the bases -- Visiting Forces Agreement,” Duterte added.

“I’m giving... the American government one month from now.” The Visiting Forces Agree-



If you do not make a correction there, one, I will terminate the bases -- Visiting Forces Agreement

RODRIGO DUTERTE

ment (VFA) outlines the rules governing conduct of US troops participating in joint military exercises in the Philippines.

The pact gave legal cover for the resumption of large-scale war games between the two al-

lies after the US military closed its Philippine bases in the 1990s amid rising anti-US sentiment.

Duterte also threatened in 2016 to cancel the agreement, but has generally attacked ties with the US, including an announced “separation” from its former colonial master.

Until now the president has not made good on those threats, some of which came after then US president Barack Obama was critical of Duterte’s crackdown in 2016.

Relations between Washington and Manila under President Donald Trump, who has voiced support for Duterte, are on a stronger footing.