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Homes near chemical plant evacuated after blast; cylinder of reducing agent blamed

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By SUSAN HAIGH, Associated Press Writer

GROTON, Connecticut - Pfizer Corp.'s research complex was closed and nearby homes evacuated Wednesday as fire crews worked to stabilize chemicals after an explosion that left two people with severe burns.

Tuesday's blast was traced to a 250-pound (112.5-kilogram) cylinder containing a reducing agent, borane-tetrahydrofuran, company spokesman Stephen Lederer said Wednesday.

The explosion created a fireball, ripping apart a small warehouse and blowing out windows on an adjacent building at Groton Laboratories, officials said.

Two workers remained in critical condition Wednesday with burns over much of their bodies.

The warehouse is used to store chemicals for making medications for clinical trials, the company said.

Officials didn't know why the container exploded, Lederer said. "It is a real mystery. We are being very careful picking through everything," he said.

Five other containers of the substance were still in the warehouse and showed higher-than-normal pressure readings, Lederer said, prompting authorities to begin knocking on doors at daybreak to ask residents of 102 homes to leave.

"There's a lot of variables coming into play, and we don't want to take chances," Mayor Dennis L. Popp told WVIT-TV.

The evacuation was voluntary, and authorities could not immediately say how many residents decided to leave.

Health officials took air samples overnight, but most of the substance was likely destroyed in the explosion, said Ben York, a supervisor for the state Department of Environmental Protection.

The explosion also injured five other workers. Two were treated and released from a local hospital, one for burns and the other for smoke inhalation; three others were treated for minor injuries at the complex's health center.

Groton Laboratories employs about 4,500 people.

On the Net:

<http://www.pfizer.com>

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