





huge gas explosion in Belgium has killed 15 people and injured 120, many of them with serious burns.

The blast, at an industrial park about 30km (20 miles) south-west of Brussels, sent flames shooting into the air, and was felt over a wide area.

A fire service spokesman at the scene near the town of Ath said the site of the explosion looked like a war zone.

Emergency services treated the blast as a major incident and troops helped with the disaster response.

A nearby motorway was closed and local residents were advised to stay indoors with their windows closed.

Some of the dead are reported to have been killed as they went to investigate a leak in the pipeline carrying gas from the port of Zeebrugge on the Belgian coast to France.

Firefighters and policemen are among the casualties.

Devastation

“ It sounded as if a plane had crashed. All the windows shook... it was terrible, terrible ”

Witness

A fire service spokesman told Reuters news agency that bodies and debris from the blast were scattered hundreds of metres around the disaster site at the Ghislenghien industrial park.

"There were bodies in parking lots, in the fields; burnt out cars in an area half a kilometre wide," he said. "It looks like a war zone."

Local resident Olivier Rampelberg, who lives about 3km (2 miles) from the scene, told Belgian television he heard the loud blast.

"It sounded like continuous thunder," he said. "Then little grains of scorched earth rained down."

Another witness told a radio reporter: "It sounded as if a plane had crashed. All the windows shook... it was terrible, terrible."

'Not dangerous'

Army units have been called in to help co-ordinate the disaster response and military helicopters have helped ferry victims to hospitals and specialist burn units.

France has also sent medical support and a helicopter.

Christian Otto, a spokesman for Fluxys, which runs the country's gas pipelines, said the blast completely destroyed buildings in the immediate area.

He said the company had stopped pumping gas along the line and had taken measures to keep supplying customers.

Acting provincial governor Guy Petit said local people were no longer at risk.

"This was a leak of gas for residential use - it is not a dangerous chemical," he said.

Belgian Interior Minister Patrick Dewael and Defence Minister Andre Flahaut have both gone to the scene and Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt has broken off his holiday in Italy to fly home and visit the disaster site.



In pictures: Belgium gas blast

