

Gasoline ignites on flooding Texas river

HOUSTON — Two pipelines beneath a roiling river burst Thursday, sending 100-foot flames of burning gasoline snaking more than a mile down the San Jacinto River. At least 69 people were injured.

"It looked like hell opened up on the water and the whole river was gasoline," said Mike Norman, who was on the bank trying to retrieve his sailboat when the explosion occurred.

Some 11,500 people were forced from their homes by heavy rain that began Sunday. Skies were clearing, the murky water had begun to recede in most areas, and some people were returning to their damaged homes when the pipeline broke east of Houston, sending smoke and flame hundreds of feet into the air. The flooding has claimed at least 15 lives.

The burning mixture wound 1 1/2 miles downstream, setting fire to homes and boats along the banks. Schools and businesses in

the path of the smoke were evacuated. Most of the injured were treated for minor burns and smoke inhalation.

"There were three loud booms and then an immediate black cloud," witness Doug Trowbridge said. "It just began to spread like wildfire."

The first explosion, around 10:30 a.m. occurred near "The Spaghetti Bowl," the mouth of the nation's interstate pipeline network. A second pipeline ruptured around 2 p.m.

U.S. Transportation Secretary Federico Pena surveyed scene by helicopter and said the explosion was likely caused by the rain-swollen river.

"We have seen this in other parts of the country where you have massive flooding and pipes are hit, tanks get loose and you have ruptures and you have explosions," Pena said, adding that an investigation was planned.

The two pipelines, about 8 feet

apart, are buried about 3 feet beneath the floor of the river, said Sam Whitehead, spokesman for Atlanta-based Colonial Pipeline. They run beneath the river for about 2 miles.

The first line, 40 inches in diameter, carries gasoline from nearby Pasadena to New Jersey. The second line, 36 inches in diameter, carries No. 2 diesel fuel, Whitehead said.

Whitehead said the company doesn't know what caused the ruptures or how many gallons of fuel spilled.

"This was a very serious flooding situation. That's the only thing that we know that is unusual," Whitehead said.

The rupture caused gasoline future prices to rise in trading on the New York Mercantile Exchange. Wholesale unleaded gasoline for November delivery rose 1.95 cents to 49.95 cents a gallon, a seven-week high.

The Coast Guard was investi-



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gating a possible rupture of a second line nearby. The substance believed leaking was not immediately known.

Emergency crews had trouble putting out the fire because their boats could not handle the swirling river currents and fire trucks were blocked by flooded roads, said Coast Guard Cmdr. Eric Nicholas.

Valves on either side of the 2-mile section of pipeline were shut off, but gasoline is likely to continue spilling into the river, said George Tenley, associate administrator of pipeline safety for the U.S. Transportation Department.

More than 400,000 gallons of gasoline spilled before the shutoff, Tenley said. The 2-mile section can hold hundreds of thousands of gallons, he said.

Tenley said operators of 11 other pipelines carrying hazardous chemicals in the area were asked to shut down their lines for fear that the fire might spread to them.

Flames reached at least one barge, burning foam insulation used to seal the compartments from water and emitting cyanide smoke, Nicholas said. Cyanide is a foam insulation ingredient, and the smoke is not dangerous unless people are close to it, he said.

East and southwest of the city, the water was still rising from the storms' runoff.

Press excluded from part of jury selection

LOS ANGELES — Overwhelmed by publicity so wide-ranging he's gotten news clippings from Tibet, O.J. Simpson's judge barred the media Thursday from part of jury selection.

Superior Court Judge Lance Ito closed the part of voir dire in which prospective jurors will be asked whether they can still be impartial despite intensive coverage of the case. Reporters will be allowed back in the courtroom Wednesday when prospective jurors are quizzed about other matters.

Ito's ruling drew protests from First Amendment experts, many of whom initially thought he was barring the media from the remainder of jury selection.

Later, Ito sent a court spokeswoman to the media center to say he was misinterpreted and planned to

O.J. Simpson



ON TRIAL

Ito said the 1984 case "was not the subject of the talk show circuit, was not the subject of the morning shows or jokes on the Jay Leno show, was not a topic of conversation everywhere you go."

He noted publicity was so widespread he had recently received a news clipping from Tibet.

Ito has been particularly concerned about a book published this week that he says threatens Simpson's right to a fair trial.

His ruling came just a day after two media organizations turned down his request to postpone plans to interview the co-author of the book, "Nicole Brown Simpson: The Private Diary of a Life Interrupted." Written by Faye Resnick, a friend of Ms. Simpson's, it alleges that Simpson stalked his ex-wife and threatened to kill her.

Earlier this week, jury selection was halted for two days because of the release of the Resnick book.

Ito, who planned to question prospective jurors in-depth about the book, cited concerns that they would not be candid if faced with scrutiny of their answers.

In the Press-Enterprise case, the Supreme Court held unanimously that trial judges must permit the press to attend jury selection except in rare instances where "closure is essential to preserve higher values" and there is no less restrictive alternative available.

"We're not trying to get around the public's right to know," defense attorney Johnnie Cochran Jr. said. "We applaud that. But we're in a rare, sensitive area."

Deputy District Attorney Marcia Clark said the private questioning of jurors would make them feel more comfortable and increase the likelihood they'll give candid answers.

"We have a star chamber going on upstairs."

DOUGLAS MIRELL

American Civil Liberties Union attorney

ban reporters only from that part of jury selection in which prospective jurors are questioned about their exposure to media coverage of the case.

Attorneys for media organizations, including The Associated Press, were studying the ruling before deciding whether to file an appeal.

The motion to close jury selection was made by both the defense and the prosecution at the urging of the judge.

Kelli Sager, a lawyer representing a number of news media organizations, said that closing the proceedings violates the First Amendment.

"We have a star chamber going on upstairs," said American Civil Liberties Union attorney Douglas Mirell after the hearing recessed and jury selection resumed behind closed doors.

In 1984, in Riverside Press-Enterprise Co. vs. Superior Court, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed a judge's decision to close jury selection in a rape murder case.

Korean bridge collapses

SEOUL, South Korea — A section of a major bridge collapsed during morning rush hour Friday in Seoul, sending a packed city bus, a van and about 10 cars plummeting to the river below. At least 42 people were killed.

Some of the cars fell into the shallow water of the Han River. Others, including the upside-down wreckage of the bus, remained on the fallen 150-foot section of the Songsu bridge, which did not sink.

The bus was carrying about 60 people, including several high school students.

Boats, divers and helicopters rushed to the scene to rescue survivors. About 30 people were rescued, according to news reports. Some of the injured were loaded

onto nets lowered by helicopters and rushed to hospitals.

Rescue workers recovered at least 42 bodies, MBC, the semi-official television network, quoted police as saying.

The city had repaired the Songsu bridge the day before and investigators rushed to the scene after the 7:30 a.m. collapse (4:30 p.m. EDT Thursday) to examine the quality of the work done, state-run KBS television said.

KBS also said the 18-ton weight limit of the bridge was often exceeded by the vehicles crossing it.

Recent news reports have said that many of the 15 bridges crossing the Han River need repairs. The Songsu bridge was built in 1979.

State takes over city schools

EAST ST. LOUIS, Ill. — The state took over the city's school district Thursday to relieve it of financial problems so crushing that students often can't get hot lunches and hall monitors carry whistles because the fire alarms don't work.

The plan to run the finances of the 14,000-student district in this desperately poor city was unanimously approved by the state Board of Education during a meeting in Rock Island.

The district is \$10 million in debt and has a severe shortage of teachers.

Students struggle to learn in overcrowded classrooms with equipment that often is older than their parents. And the district's finances are in such disarray that it recently discovered that health insurance premiums were being paid for dead employees.

"This is not a punitive action. This is a helping action," said state schools Superintendent Joseph Spagnolo.

"I believe this is in the best interest of the children of East St. Louis."

"There have been mistakes. ... But you have to recognize that we now have a new team in place," said District Superintendent Geraldine Jenkins.

Spagnolo cited a "six-year pattern of financial mismanagement, amended plans and unmet promises." He will appoint a three-member panel within 10 days to oversee the district's finances.

The move lets the state board bring in more teachers, approve contracts and set financial policy. Since 1988, the district has been required to get board approval for its finances.

Times have never been easy in the mostly black East St. Louis schools, just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis.

This fall classes started with 50 fewer teachers and about half the cafeteria staff. At one high school, monitors have to walk the halls and blow whistles if there's a fire because the alarms don't work. At other schools, students endure cold lunches and are warehoused in gyms.

"We just sit in the bleachers and look stupid," said Dionta Heard, 16, who doesn't have English class because there's no teacher.

The city of 41,000 has itself been in a downward slide since the 1960s,

Eye laser approved

GAITHERSBURG, Md. — A panel of outside scientists advised the Food and Drug Administration on Thursday to approve the nation's first eye laser to correct nearsightedness, provided the maker can meet strict safety criteria.

Summit Technology Inc. must show the FDA that at least 75 percent of patients treated with this laser will have good enough vision to abandon their glasses or contact lenses and that only a tiny number could have their vision worsened because of the procedure.

The 13-1 vote by the panel came after 12 1/2 hours of often-testy debate. At one point, the panel came within a single vote of completely rejecting the OmniMed laser.

with unemployment that some state analysts said could be as high as 37 percent. Several years ago, the city couldn't afford to pay its workers or pick up trash.

Last week, the city approved a plan to slash its own debt from \$85 million to \$27 million using state-backed bonds.

The latest problems at the school district surfaced Monday, when the city school board learned that health insurance premiums were still being paid for former and even dead workers. The board is withholding the \$500,000 monthly premium while trying to determine how much was overpaid and for how long.

Figures on the district's payroll are hard to come by and the exact number of teachers isn't known. A district report said about 1,500 employees work at the city's two high schools, four junior highs and 21 elementary schools.

"I am hopeful that this is the dawn of a great, new day for the students in this school district," said Irl Solomon, who has taught high school for 22 years.

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