

Fire at Damu Nagar slum: Over 25 gas cylinders explode; two killed, 2,000 huts gutted

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Thousands of huts gutted as fire hits Mumbai's Kandivali East area. (Express Photo by Vasant Prabhu)

MULTIPLE gas cylinder explosions coupled with gusty winds led to about 2,000 shanties being burnt to the ground hours after a huge fire broke out at the Damu Nagar slum in Kandivali (East) on Monday. While two bodies were recovered from the charred remains of the shanty town, 11 persons were rushed to Shatabdi Hospital with injuries and several thousand people were left mourning for the loss of their homes and valuables.

Fire department officials said the cause of the fire was yet to be determined, but added that the 25 to 30 cooking gas cylinders that had burst were cooled down and handed over to the Samta Nagar police for investigations.

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Deputy Chief Fire Officer K V Hirwale stated that every household in the area had either a kerosene stove or gas cylinders. “We still have to determine the cause of the fire. However, the fire spread rapidly owing to high wind velocity and the large number of cylinders in the area. More than 50 per cent of the shanties had an average of two gas cylinders,” said Hirwale, adding that despite asking the cooking gas cylinder companies to send officials to the site, no representative turned up. “The gas companies should have sent an officer to inspect the site since they are the supplying companies. An inspection would have revealed why so many households had more than one cylinder in their houses,” said Hirwale.

According to the local residents, they first heard one loud explosion followed by a rapidly spreading blaze that progressed to neighbouring shanties. Residents of nearby highrise buildings captured the huge inferno, the periodic explosions and the billowing smoke on their mobile phone cameras. “After we saw the fire, there was panic among people. Then we heard cylinders blowing up every five minutes. So we started removing our cylinders from our house and running out.



(Express Photo by Vasant Prabhu)

Despite that, our house has been completely destroyed by the fire,” said Ajay Gupta, one of the residents of the slum.

Fire department officials said 16 fire engines, 10 tankers and four ambulances had reached the spot. The first call was received at 12:45 pm.

Hirwale said that unlike for commercial users, neither safety instructions are given to domestic users nor any safety standards are monitored especially in slum areas. “Given the large number of people using cylinders in a slum area where the houses don’t have a proper structure, gas companies should monitor the supply of cylinders. We will write to the companies to adopt more stringent norms for supplying. If they investigate, they can take action against the agencies who are illegally supplying multiple cylinders and even terminate contracts with them,” said Hirwale.

Most families were unable to save any valuables with cash as well as important documents such as ration cards burnt down.

As she tried to salvage a few vessels, Sonabai Rathod rued that she had lost Rs 50,000 and some gold jewellery in the fire. “I have no idea how to move on from this. My daughter-in-law’s gold as well as the money that I had kept for my son’s wedding is all gone now. How will I raise so much money now?” she said.

Of the 13 patients brought to the Kandivali located Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar hospital, two were declared dead on arrival with severe burn injuries. “One was charred beyond recognition,” said Dr K G Pimpre, medical superintendent at the hospital. The other deceased was 45-year-old Prahlad Kharat who

reportedly hid under his bed when he heard the blasts. His 40-year-old wife Chandrakala had gone to the dispensary to purchase some medicines when the fire started.

“He was not well and was bedridden and wasn’t able to get out in time. I wish I had been there to get him out. I have lost everything,” she said.

Pimpre added that of the 11 remaining patients admitted at the hospital, six were discharged later in the day. The remaining five are still admitted and underwent X-rays and received primary treatment for abrasions sustained while attempting to run. Only one lady named Parvati Shankar (65) sustained between 30 to 35 per cent burns during the mishap. “She has burns majorly on her hands while she attempted to shield herself,” Pimpre said, adding that the sexagenarian is now stable.

Fire department officials also pointed out that the recent fire in Kurla’s Kinara restaurant was similarly caused by a spark and a leaking gas tube, with gas cylinders illegally stored in a mezzanine space while the cooking space was on the ground floor. Eight people died in that fire. Following a detailed inquiry, the BMC had cautioned the gas company in that case as well.

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