

Home at last

The question is: Why chlorine and propane together?

By MARY LOUISE BIRKS and JOHN STEWART
Times staff writers

A quarter of a million Mississauga residents are returning this morning to homes they were forced to leave after a spectacular train derailment Saturday caused fire, explosions and fear of spreading lethal chlorine gas.

They were part of probably the largest evacuation in North American history. Most of Mississauga's 280,000 residents and some from Oakville fled the area taking little more than the clothes they wore.

For two and a half days the crash placed Mississauga on the edge of disaster and created an overnight ghost-city. Only firemen, ambulance drivers and other emergency workers were admitted into the 50 square-mile evacuated area.

Miraculously no one was hurt.

Approximately 100,000 people were allowed to return to their homes late yesterday afternoon. People living west of Erin Mills Parkway and Southdown Road and east of Cawthra Road began returning Tuesday afternoon.

The second phase of the evacuation which was to have taken place yesterday afternoon would see residents returned to the area south of the Q.E.W. from Cawthra Rd. to Highway 10 and from Erin Mills Parkway east to the Credit River.

The process of evacuating the evacuation centres began. Mississauga Transit buses were used to transport many of

the estimated 2,500 people from the centres back to their homes.

Officials hoped to open the Q.E.W. and allow GO trains to stop in Mississauga.

At a press conference, Ontario Attorney General Roy McMurtry said the remaining areas of the city were considered potentially unsafe.

McMurtry warned residents to make an orderly return to their homes and not to use their telephones. Bell is worried about the overloading of circuits.

McMurtry stressed that the chlorine car has not been sealed. He said there could be potential danger because two propane cars must be moved in order to gain access to the chlorine car. "The escape of chlorine is still possible over a significant distance," said McMurtry. He also said there were pockets of propane throughout the area.

From the moment the CP

rail freight train derailed, a tank car containing toxic liquid chlorine, lying only 30 metres from the closest of the burning propane tankers, has been a time bomb with a fragile trigger. (Two propane cars exploded when the train derailed, and a third blew up later in the fire.)

Officials feared if the tanker containing the liquid chlorine exploded, it could disperse deadly chlorine gas over heavily populated areas of Mississauga and neighboring Oakville and Toronto.

Preliminary investigations have revealed that the train wreck occurred when a wheel bearing overheated and broke.

The Canadian Transport Commission (CTC) will hold a public inquiry into the accident, probably within two weeks, said commission chairman John Magee.

One of the key questions investigators will have to answer is why both chlorine

and propane filled tankers were shipped together in the first place.

For the near disaster, for the near disaster, investigators will have to decide if the Canadian Pacific Railway ignored CTC standards concerning the transport of dangerous commodities, or if the CTC allows chlorine and propane-filled tank cars to be shipped on the same train.

The only assurance the federal government has made is that laws will be passed to make it less likely for such an emergency to occur in the future.

In Ottawa yesterday, Transport Minister Don Mazankowski, bombarded by questions from opposition MPs, said he would introduce new legislation within 10 days to regulate the transportation of dangerous goods.

Mazankowski told the House of Commons that

extensive consultation with industry and the provinces has produced general agreement on the provisions of a bill which is in the final drafting changes.

Attorney-General Roy McMurtry spoke to reporters at the accident site yesterday and called for more stringent federal regulations on the transport of deadly chemicals.

Mississauga Mayor Hazel McCallion said she's appalled by the lack of transport regulations. McCallion said if the accident had happened just a short distance down the track from the accident site, "it could have wiped out thousands of people — it's a miracle it happened where it did."

(East and west of the crash site at Mavis Road, a predominately industrial area, subdivisions back up to the tracks.)

Two municipal buildings near the level crossing accident site were demolished in the blaze. The mayor said she's warned all the municipal departments to tally up their losses so the city can present someone with a bill.

Regional chairman Frank Bean has accused CP Rail of jeopardizing thousands of lives by its careless handling of hazardous substances. "The information we got from the railway was that they didn't know what was on the train themselves," said Bean, who was one of the first to demand top-level investigation by the federal government.

Most of the lethal gas gone

By JOHN STEWART
Times staff writer

Officials discovered yesterday morning up to 70 per cent of lethal chlorine gas leaked into the atmosphere within an hour and a half of the freight train derailment at Mavis Road Saturday midnight.

Chemical experts seeking to repair the chlorine tanker yesterday morning found a three-foot hole that had been

punctured on impact spewing chlorine gas 6,000 to 8,000 feet into the air. Mississauga Fire Chief Gordon Bentley said "great amounts of the chlorine must have escaped in the original thermal column" that followed the explosion of propane cars after the derailment.

The chlorine escaped in gas form and was not recorded because measuring equipment

arrived an hour and a half after the accident.

Attorney-General Roy McMurtry, asked whether the evacuation of 250,000 people would have taken place had this information been available, said it would have depended on chemical experts' advice.

Officials said the chlorine gas dissipated in the upper atmosphere after being carried up by the force of the explosion.

What, where, when, why and how

By MARY LOUISE BIRKS
Times staff writer

Just before midnight a 106-car Canadian Pacific freight train crosses Mavis Road just north of Dundas Street in a predominantly industrial area. 24 cars hop the tracks and pile up across the right of way at the level crossing. Later railway officials confirm that 18 of the derailed cars were carrying "dangerous commodities," which included 11 tank cars full of propane or butane, three holding toluene, three holding caustic soda and one holding chlorine.

in the next hour and a half six of the tank cars explode. The blast is heard and felt over 30 miles away.

the train crew is able to detach the first 24 cars remaining on the track, including some with hazardous cargoes.

chlorine gas begins to leak from the crippled tanker after other cars containing butane gas start to explode.

fearful even more chlorine will spread over the area if the ruptured tanker containing chlorine explodes, fire and police officials evacuate the immediate area.

by Sunday morning 10,000 Mississauga residents have been moved to high schools and shopping centres as a safety precaution.

a fleet of ambulances begins to evacuate more than

450 patients from Mississauga General Hospital at 9:30 a.m. Sunday.

by late afternoon the evacuation area extends from the Credit River to Etobicoke Creek and from Burnhamthorpe Road south to Lake Ontario.

the fleet of ambulances rallies at Queensway General Hospital to evacuate patients.

at the site firemen hose down the chlorine tanker with special coolants but it continues to burst into flames at intervals.

over 600 Peel police assisted by members of the Metro force, the OPP, the army and off-duty RCMP seal off the evacuation area and

patrol to prevent looting.

on Sunday night the cause of the derailment is disclosed by CP officials, who say that an overheated wheel bearing burst into flame.

by 4 a.m. Monday Canada's ninth biggest city is shut down — a virtual ghost city.

the boundaries of the evacuation area continue to expand as police officials fear wind shifts could carry deadly chlorine fumes leaking slowly from the ruptured tanker over a wider area.

over 1,000 Oakville residents, including almost 300 patients from Oakville-Trafalgar Memorial Hospital, are told to leave their homes Monday morning.

36 hours after the crash, officials at the scene say an explosion and formation of deadly chlorine gas could still occur.

firemen at the site wait for the two remaining blazing butane tank cars to burn out.

late Monday afternoon residents in Streetsville and Meadowvale are told by policemen to be prepared to get out if the winds shifted, blowing the deadly chlorine gas toward them.

shortly after 11 p.m. a temporary patch is placed over a hole in the leaking chlorine tank car.

when the last propane tanker burns itself out Monday night, experts cover the 18-inch gap in the tank with a steel patch.

Contributing to this special edition of The Mississauga Times were: editor Peter Armstrong and Chris Zelkovich; reporters Mary Louise Birks, Alana Griffiths, Rod Jerred, Tom Maloney, Connie Rae and John Stewart; photographers Rob Beintema, Morris Lamont and Gorm Larsen; and special contributors Tony Fenton, Ian Macpherson and David Turnbull