

## **Chemical plant accident in East St. Louis kills 2 workers**

*By Tim Logan and Ken Leiser/St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Sep 1, 2008*

Two workers were killed and at least seven sickened Saturday by toxic powder after an accident at a chemical storage and blending plant in East St. Louis, officials said.

A pile of the chemical remained inside Ro-Corp Inc., at 643 North 20th Street, just off State Street, but there was no immediate risk to residents, City Manager Robert Betts said at the scene.

He said the FBI had joined the investigation but that terrorism was not suspected.

Betts confirmed the two deaths but did not provide any details of who they were or where they died.

Six people seeking treatment at mid-afternoon caused precautionary closing of emergency rooms at St. Anthony's Medical Center in south St. Louis County and DePaul Health Center in Bridgeton.

A seventh victim was seen at Barnes-Jewish Hospital, where the ER remained open. Other hospitals may have seen more.

Medical examiners in St. Louis and St. Louis County, and the Madison County coroner's office, reported no chemical-related deaths Saturday. The St. Clair County coroner could not be reached.

The victims were exposed to nitroaniline, a highly toxic powder that can attack the respiratory system and get into the bloodstream, said Chief Jim Silvernail of the Mehlville Fire Protection District, which includes St. Anthony's.

"This chemical is bad," he said.

Silvernail said he was told the lid popped off when a drum of the chemical was dropped, raising a cloud of the powder around the workers.

Neither hospital staffs nor other patients were believed to have been poisoned, but the emergency rooms were quarantined for decontamination. DePaul's was expected to reopen late Saturday night. There was no word on St. Anthony's reopening. Each saw three of the victims.

The patients arrived on their own. It was not clear why they sought help so far from where they were exposed. Betts said some had been seen in the ER of Kenneth Hall Regional Hospital in downtown East St. Louis and sent elsewhere for more specialized care.

The victims at DePaul were reported to have been admitted in fair condition. Conditions of the ones at the other hospitals were not available.

There also was a report of a house quarantined at an undisclosed location in University City, which one of the workers may have contaminated when he went home.

Ro-Corp is a part of the St. Louis-based G.S. Robins and Co., a chemical supplier, according to its website. The site says, "Ro-Corp is a packaging/repackaging facility for dry materials. Bulk storage, rail access, milling and dry blending are among the services available at this site."

No one responded to a message left with the company Saturday night.

Betts said there was no need for an evacuation around the plant.

"The situation has been isolated and contained and we know where the substance is," he said.

He pledged that city officials would investigate compliance with the law. "If it's the sort of chemical that can kill if you touch it, then no, we don't want that in our community," he said.

Rocco Goins, the city's emergency services director, said the company was certified to handle the chemical involved.

Emergency crews remained there late Saturday night. Four emergency workers were taken from the scene by ambulance Saturday night for precautionary examination, officials said.

Dan Browning, who was in St. Anthony's ER with a liver ailment, said the staff reacted quickly when the three powder victims arrived together. "They came in ... and all of a sudden they put this quarantine thing up. Nobody knew what was going on."

*Elisa Crouch of the Post-Dispatch contributed information for this story.*