

WORKERS INJURED BY ACID FUMES

David Williamson, The Western Mail, Sep 13 2003

HELMONT House is one of the flagship buildings in the heart of the Welsh capital.

Cloaked in shining steel and glass, it is an icon of New Wales, the hub of British Gas's communications with much of Britain, and a structure containing 2,700 employees.

But yesterday these men and women fled from the building when its air-conditioning system began wafting bromine acid fumes through its corridors.

Within hours of the incident, fingers of blame were pointed at workmen who had been mixing cleaning fluids on the roof. When chlorine reacted with other chemicals the fumes were created which were quickly swept into the building.

Fiona Perry, who works in customer sales, said, "It was about 12.30pm and we were working hard and we started smelling something that smelled a little like swimming pool chlorine.

"People were saying, 'What's going on? It smells like something's on fire.'

"We were sitting by the double doors and it seemed to be a lot stronger there. We were asked to move away from the area and an announcement came over the PA that we should wait for emergency procedures.

"No-one really knew what the chemicals were. One of the guys sitting opposite me was coughing pretty badly as he had asthma.

"The evacuation announcement was made so we piled into the emergency stairwells.

"It was quite a shock but we were used to fire drills. The worst that happened was that some people had stinging eyes and sore throats.

"I wandered off to get some food. I came back and the police cordon was up and we couldn't get back into the building.

"A policeman said if you were in there at the time of the incident you need checked out. I went to the ambulances.

"They took my pulse. They had some paddling pools. They wanted us to wash our hands and faces. It was very embarrassing.

"I'm glad they looked after us. It gave us great piece of mind."

Fire engines and ambulances were clustered around Helmont House.

Police cordoned off a "decontamination zone" in which the dolphin-decorated paddling pools were located.

Staff loitering around the perimeter praised the rescue workers and the company's evacuation procedures.

One of them said, "They were very quick. I've got to be fair. The response time was excellent."

Some complained of sinus pains. Nearby traffic wardens claimed to be developing sore throats.

South Wales Police have spent recent days simulating a disaster situation.

With policeman shouting phrases such as "Have you decontaminated that lady yet?", the evacuation was a hint of how great the challenges of a true disaster would be.

Gwyn Winfield, publisher of Resilience, a magazine which examines how prepared Britain is for a terrorist attack, said a deliberate release of poison gas would have much more horrific results.

"Everything that happens like that [the Bromine release] is a good test of our training but that sort of event should not be seen as a preview of what would happen if a terrorist attack happened."

Mr Winfield anticipates a combination of the release of a chemical or biological agent with a large explosion and an attack by gunmen on emergency workers.

He said, "If you look at the modus operandi of Al-Qaeda that's the type of event they have wanted to pull off."

Britain, he said, lagged far behind Australia, the United States and Norway in terms of disaster preparation.

He was not impressed by the emergency exercise held last Sunday at Bank Tube station.

"In terms of preparation for a chemical or biological attack it was next to useless," he said. "It took them three hours to get the individuals up to the surface. If they used a sarin-type gas everybody would be dead."

The worst element of a chemical attack, he said, would be the chaos it would generate. People in panicked crowds would break bones in stampedes while emergency crews would struggle to reach the incident on gridlocked roads. Chaos could only intensify if they were shot at.

As security increases in the United States, among the targets he thought terrorists might be tempted to attack are Disneyland Paris and the Channel Tunnel.

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