

# 4 Killed in Paris Explosion During Protests

Four people died and nearly 50 were injured in a massive gas explosion that gutted the ground floor of a building in a central Paris shopping district on Saturday, authorities said.

The accident occurred with Paris under security lockdown for a ninth consecutive Saturday of “yellow vest” protests, with large parts of the French capital blocked off by riot police.

Interior Minister Christophe Castaner told reporters that two civilians and two firefighters had died of their injuries from the gas blast.

“As firemen were looking for a gas leak in the building, a dramatic explosion took place,” Castaner said, adding that one of the firemen had been buried under debris for several hours.

Ten people had serious but non-life threatening injuries while at least another 37 people had lighter injuries, he said.

As Castaner spoke, thousands of yellow vest protesters marched noisily but peacefully through the Grands Boulevards shopping district of northern Paris, just a few hundred meters (yards) from the location of the explosion.

In recent years, France has suffered a string of deadly Islamist militant attacks in Paris, Nice, Marseille and elsewhere but authorities quickly ruled out foul play.

“At this stage we can say it (the gas blast) is clearly an accident,” Paris prosecutor Remi Heitz told reporters.

A police source said the explosion tore apart a bakery on the rue Trevisé and witnesses said the force of the blast shattered nearby storefronts and rocked buildings hundreds of meters away.

More than 200 firefighters joined the rescue operation and two helicopters landed on the nearby Place de l'Opera to evacuate victims. Ambulances struggled to access the blast area because of police barriers set up to help contain any violence by yellow vest protesters.

An eyewitness at a hotel nearby said he saw flames envelop the ground floor of the building blown out by the blast.

"There was broken glass everywhere, storefronts were blown out and windows were shattered up to the third and fourth floors," said 38-year-old David Bangura.

He said that as he approached the scene, a woman was crying for help from the first floor of a building: "Help us, help us, we have a child." {eo}

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