

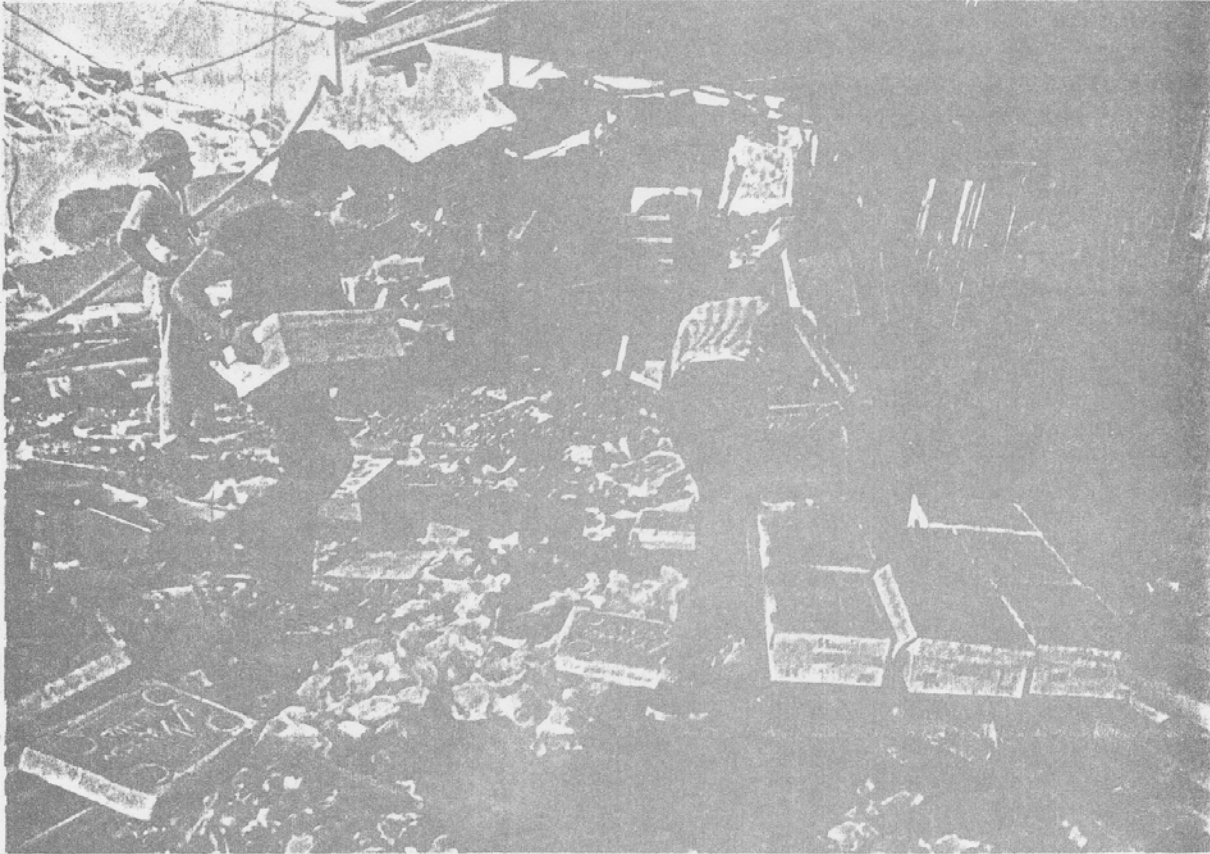
Fair through Wednesday. The low today near 70, the high today and Wednesday near 80. Winds northeast to east 15 to 20 m.p.h.

Data, A2

# The Palm Beach

VOL. LXVIII NO. 46

WEST PALM BEACH, FLORIDA, TUESDAY MORNING, APRIL



Staff Photos by /

Boxes of Tomatoes Are Stacked on a Pallet in the Damaged Warehouse

## Blast Hits Lantana Plant

### Tomato Workers Hurt in Explosion

By DICK DONOVAN

Post Staff Writer

LANTANA — An explosion believed caused by ethylene gas yesterday injured seven people and heavily damaged a tomato-processing and packing plant on Lantana Road, about two miles west of Military Trail.

All of the injured are employees of Mecca Farms Inc. Only one, 51-year-old Bernard Wright, was hospitalized. About 65 other plant workers were unhurt.

The blast, which came shortly after 10 a.m., demolished a one-story, 60-foot by 80-foot concrete block ripening building and caused extensive damage to the adjoining packing plant, where most of the employees were working.

Trail Park Fire Chief Robert Bean said it appears the explosion was caused by ethylene gas used in the plant to ripen tomatoes. The gas reportedly had been sprayed into the block building only minutes before the blast.

"It's an absolute miracle that no one was killed," Bean said. "I'm 99 per cent certain the explosion was caused by the gas. I should know more (today) if the main building is shored up enough so that it's safe for us to go in and start digging in the rubble."

The ripening building abuts the west end of the larger, corrugated steel packing plant. The full force of the explosion appears to have been to the west, away from the plant, and scattered debris and concrete rub-



'I'll tell you, it scared me to death. I jumped up and ran into the packing house and I knew it was gas. I could smell it. It was all smoky like. Then I ran outside to see if I could help. Everybody was screaming and crying. It was terrible!'

— Carrie Moore

## Explosion — From Page 1

"It was very fortunate it all went that way or we would have had a lot of dead or badly injured people here," Palm Beach County Sheriff William Heidtman told reporters at the scene. "The other part of the building was loaded with workers."

Carrie Moore, a secretary working in the plant office, said about 75 workers were in the packing plant at the time. She said all of them were accounted for after the blast.

"I'll tell you, it scared me to death," she said. "I jumped up and ran into the packing house and I knew it was gas. I could smell it. It was all smokey like. Then I ran outside to see if I could help. Everybody was screaming and crying. It was terrible!"

According to Sheriff's Detective James Rendell, a cylinder that feeds ethylene gas into the ripening room was turned on by plant worker Eddie Ricardo and turned off again 10 minutes later by another worker, Jose Rodriguez. A plant official said the 10-minute gassing time is closely watched because longer gassing "is detrimental to the tomatoes."

"I turned the gas off and walked around to the rear of the plant building to go to the restroom," Rodriguez said. "I went inside and there was the explosion. It blew the door open and knocked me against the (restroom) wall. It was just a few minutes after I turned it off. I'm very lucky to be alive."

Rodriguez' wife, Elsa, was working in the packing plant when the blast occurred and for a few terrifying minutes she was certain her husband had been killed.

"When the gas exploded, I just took off in a panic," she said, still shaking from the experience. "I knew my husband was working near the tanks. I wanted to go inside, but someone was holding me back. I was screaming for Jose and they wouldn't let me go to him."

"There are four (men) who work on the fork lifts," she continued. "When I got outside, I only saw three. I knew he had to be inside. Then, later, I saw him and he told me he had been in the restroom. If he hadn't gone there, I think he would be dead now."

One plant worker said the ethylene

gas system had been "worked on" Friday but said he didn't know the nature of the repair. However, a plant official said a valve had been replaced but declined further comment.

Bean said his department's data on ethylene gas indicates it is a highly unstable gas and one which, among other things, reacts violently to exposure to water.

"On a scale of zero to four, its fire hazard is rated four — the worst rating," he said. "Its explosive rating is two. I'll have to discuss it with a chemist, but it's odd that a gas that reacts to water is used to process tomatoes. They have a lot of water."

Bean said it isn't likely the explosion was triggered by a smoker because the gas also has a violent reaction to flame or sparks.

"If anyone had struck a match in the (ripening) building, he never would have had a chance to get out," he said. "He would have been blown to pieces!"

He said he is "99 per cent certain" that no one is in the rubble of the ripening room but added that won't be known for sure until after his men have sifted through the debris.

"I don't know. We may get a surprise tomorrow, but I doubt it," he added. "The foreman (Willie Lockhart) said he was in the (ripening) building about 30 or 40 seconds before the explosion and he said no one was in there. He's a lucky man. If he had stayed in there, he wouldn't be among the living, now."

Wright, the only worker hospitalized, was reported in fair condition more in John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital in Atlantis last night.

The other injured were identified as Earl Vaughn, 45, and his wife, Lucille, 46, of rural Lantana; Vernell Schlasser, 72, of 4606 10th Ave., N.; Anita Valverde, 15, of 5571 S. 36th St., Greenacres City; and Ann Powell, 49, of Lee Brothers Farm, Lantana. They were treated at Doctors Hospital in Lake Worth and released.

Enrique Benavidem, 17, of the Lee Brothers Farm, was treated at John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital and released.



Staff Photo by A

**Firemen Assist in the Tomato Cleanup**  
... at Mecca Farms west of Military Trail