

Beat: Travel

1 dead, 33 injured after Belgium train crash releases toxic fumes

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USPA News - A train carrying chemicals derailed and caught fire in northwest Belgium on Saturday, releasing toxic fumes that may have killed one person and sickened more than 30 others, local officials said on Sunday. The cause was not immediately known.

The accident happened at around 2:30 a.m. local time when six of thirteen cars of a freight train, coming from the Netherlands, derailed in Wetteren, a municipality near the city of Ghent in the province of East Flanders. The cars then exploded in a ball of flames, triggering a massive blaze that lit up the night sky. Authorities initially evacuated around 250 people within 500 meters (1,640 feet) of the site, but the evacuation area was expanded hours later when a "small amount" of toxic fumes was detected above ground. Police ordered residents in Wetteren and the nearby villages of Serskamp and Schellebelle to remain indoors with their doors and windows closed. Firefighters were unable to fight the flames as it could have triggered the release of more toxic fumes, and it took until late Saturday afternoon before the fire in the last tank was extinguished. "The tank is still extremely hot and is being cooled with a foam carpet," a municipality spokesperson said. Officials had initially said the train driver had escaped safely and that there were no injuries, but residents who had been told to remain indoors later reported feeling ill and one person died. "It is unclear whether there is a connection between the death and the train accident. That is being investigated," the spokesperson added. But investigators could not rule out that toxic fumes were responsible for the death and those who felt sick, and some reports indicated the fumes may have entered people's homes through the sewer. "Until now, 33 people with medical problems have reported to the emergency medical services," the municipality said late on Saturday evening, updating the number from seventeen earlier in the day. East Flanders Governor Jan Briers and Wetteren Mayor Alain Pardaen visited some of the evacuees on Saturday evening. Officials said about 500 people were evacuated in the immediate vicinity of the site, but only 80 of them went to an evacuation center in the city. The remaining 420 evacuees sought shelter at friends or family.

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