

Chemical firm fire is called accidental

Fire marshals reported yesterday that the blaze at a Queens factory containing vats of cyanide chemicals was an accident caused by defective cooling fans, a Fire Department spokesman said.

The fire at the Liberty Heat Treating Co., located at 100-15 94th Ave. in Ozone Park, caused the evacuation of residents of a six-block area Wednesday afternoon.

The potential for danger was great because cyanide when mixed with water forms hydrogen cyanide gas, which is used in execution chambers.

John Mulligan, a spokesman for the Fire Department, said fans usually used to dissipate heat from the vats were not working properly, causing the heat to set the ceiling and roof ablaze.

A hundred firefighters from 25 units were called in to battle the fire, along with the department's Special Hazardous Materials Unit, whose members were wearing chemically protective outfits.

Mulligan said regular firefighters used water to dampen down the fire in the roof and ceiling while the specially suited firefighters used carbon-dioxide gas to smother a series of smaller fires that broke out around the vats.

The vats contained 60% sodium cyanide and potassium cyanide and 40% sodium carbonate and sodium chloride. The cyanide solution was used by the firm to clean and treat metals for the preparation of electro-plating metal and case-hardened steel, Mulligan said.

The spokesman said that 20 of the 21 firefighters who were treated for smoke inhalation, heat exhaustion, burns, chemical exposure, and contusions had been released from hospitals.

Firefighter Roosevelt Adams, 39, of Engine Co. 293, remained hospitalized yesterday at Jamaica Hospital in good condition. Mulligan said he was being treated for smoke inhalation.



Photo by Ken Sawchuk

Fire fighters put on protective gear before battling fire at Ozone Park factory.