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EXPLOSION ROCKS DOWNTOWN SAN FRANCISCO/BLAST:

Electrical transformer blows up, woman critically burned/MAYOR: 'Enough is enough,'
Newsom says. 'There will be accountability'/PROBE: PG&E says equ...
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An irate Mayor Gavin Newsom demanded Friday that Pacific Gas and Electric Co. inspect hundreds of underground electrical transformers after one exploded beneath Kearny Street in San Francisco's Financial District, badly injuring a woman.

The blast at 9:54 a.m. tossed a sidewalk manhole cover 30 feet, buckled two foot-thick concrete covers of the transformer vault at Kearny and Post streets, shattered windows in the Crocker Galleria shopping center and started a small fire. A 40-year-old woman walking on Kearny suffered burns to her head and neck and was hospitalized in critical condition.

Authorities, fearing at first that the explosion might have been a bomb, evacuated hundreds of people from the shopping center and surrounding buildings and kept several blocks of Kearny off-limits to traffic for more than four hours. Reflecting the jittery tenor of the times, media outlets received phone calls wondering whether terrorists had struck downtown, and one evacuee spoke of "flashes to 9/11."

Instead, officials soon focused on the PG&E vault 12 feet beneath the street and concluded that one of the three 24-year-old transformers inside had exploded.

The cause of the blast was unknown late Friday. But Newsom said it was part of a pattern of PG&E shoddiness that has caused problems for the city in the past couple of years, including two fires at one substation that knocked out power to large parts of the city for hours.

"Enough is enough. Excuses be damned, there will be accountability,"

Newsom said after inspecting the area and meeting with PG&E officials.

"It's not good enough to say, 'I'm sorry.' They need to take this very seriously."

The mayor said he wants PG&E to inspect "every vault, and there are hundreds of them," to "make certain our streets are safe."

It didn't help Newsom's mood that an unrelated incident knocked out power Friday to 2,400 customers, including some city offices. "This equipment needs to be secure and safe," he said.

Jeff Butler, PG&E's senior vice president for electric transmission and distribution, met with Newsom about the blast.

He said such a large transformer explosion "was something we haven't seen before" and expressed sympathy for the injured woman as well as inconvenienced businesses in the area.

"We take every outage, every incident very seriously," he said. "I fully understand the mayor's concerns."

He added, however, that the utility will hold off on inspecting other vaults until it determines what went wrong with the 1981-vintage transformer at Post and Kearny.

PG&E officials said that such transformers, which change electricity from one voltage to another, have a life expectancy of 40 years and that under state law the utility is required to inspect them annually. Paul Moreno, a spokesman for PG&E, said the transformer beneath Kearny was inspected within the last year, although he didn't know an exact date.

Newsom questioned PG&E's reliability in March after a fire at a substation

at Eighth and Mission streets knocked out power to 22,000 customers. He called that a "deja vu" of a fire at the same substation the weekend before Christmas in 2003, which left more than 100,000 customers without power and cost stores millions of dollars in lost holiday shopping revenue.

The staff of the state Public Utilities Commission has recommended that PG&E be fined \$10 million for the 2003 fire, which the utility conceded had burned for two hours before someone noticed it. PG&E has already paid \$2.3 million in customer compensation.

Utility officials noted that the 2003 and 2005 fires had different causes and were unrelated.

Susan Leal, head of the city's Public Utilities Commission, echoed Newsom's concerns and said Friday's blast reinforced her desire to "aggressively look at alternatives" so the city can reduce its ties with PG&E. For instance, she said, her agency is considering ways to bring public power to Treasure Island and the old Hunters Point shipyard.

"We've tried to be cooperative with PG&E," she said, "but they aren't being cooperative."

Butler said his company has earmarked hundreds of millions of dollars of improvements for the city system. "We welcome the city to review our maintenance and operations," he said.

Newsom said he was satisfied with the city's response to Friday's explosion. Authorities said they went through a checklist of procedures and brought in various federal and state agencies as part of an impromptu test of emergency procedures developed after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Hazardous-materials and police bomb crews used fiber-optic cameras to inspect the explosion site in front of the Crocker Galleria and give the

all-clear before PG&E workers were allowed in.

The only victim of the blast was being treated in the burn center at St. Francis Memorial Hospital. The woman, whose name was not released, "was just at the wrong place" when the explosion seared her head and neck, Deputy Police Chief Morris Tabak said. She works in the area, authorities said.

The blast blew out windows in the Polo Ralph Lauren store at Crocker Galleria, which workers were preparing to open for the day. It also caused a fire that burned the store's awning.

Officers closed Kearny Street from California Street to Market Street for more than four hours. The incident did not affect the California Street cable car line, but a number of Municipal Railway buses were rerouted.

Hundreds of people crowded the street in front of the Crocker Galleria after the shopping center and surrounding buildings were evacuated. Among them was Tom McGibben, who works at Thomas Weisel Partners at 120 Kearny St.

"We saw the lights flicker," McGibben said. "We felt a pretty good shake. At first, we thought it was an earthquake.

"We saw smoke," he added. "The alarms in our building came on. ... At around the 20th floor you could smell something. At that point, we began to think it could be something worse than a quake.

"There were flashes to 9/11," McGibben said.

Tim Keenan, an employee at Charles Schwab in the same building, described a flash of light, a boom that sounded like thunder and his subsequent evacuation from the 17th floor.

"I looked out of the window (and) saw people running and screaming," he said.

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