



Highway fireball incinerates its victims

By Gill Gifford and Bonile Ngqiyaza

'This is certainly the worst accident I have seen in my 36 years in this job,' said Rescue 911 spokesperson Paul Nel.

Only one of an estimated five victims who perished in a horrific accident involving a chemical tanker and a car was identifiable.

At least five people were dismembered and incinerated in Monday's collision.

'There are no faces to these bodies'

It is believed that they had been returning from a funeral in Durban.

It was not possible to say how many people were in the cab of the tanker as it was completely burnt. It had been carrying 35 000 litres of methanol.

Firefighters battled for more than six hours to put out the fire that engulfed the tanker on the N17 highway near Devon, about 45km east of Johannesburg.

One of the victims has been identified as MA Langa from Katilehong's Ramokunupi section. Three other women and a man were still unidentified by Monday night.

According to Nel, the occupants of the car, a red Toyota Corolla, appeared to have been three women and two men. But even this, he said, was only a guess made according to the jewellery and belted pants that could be identified.

Police at the scene said it would take several days to identify the bodies.

A crime scene expert said: "There are no faces to these bodies. They are completely mutilated. There was a great deal of heat there.

"The tanker was made of stainless steel, if it had been aluminium, I think it would have burnt away completely."

Nel said it was unclear what exactly occurred. He said rescue workers had pieced together an idea of what might have happened. They too described the crash as the worst they had ever seen.

According to Nel, the tanker appeared to have been heading towards Durban and was probably travelling at a high speed when it collided with the car.

"It's unclear how it all happened, but it looks like it was a head-on collision."

Nel said the Corolla went underneath the tanker and started rolling. As the car got churned underneath the wheels of the truck, it started spewing out body parts.

"So for 150 metres there's a trail of pieces of people - a hand here, a foot there, a woman's scalp and forehead. It was absolutely horrific," Nel said.

The scene was cordoned off while emergency services teams from Ekurhuleni, Lesedi, Evaton, Secunda and the Specialised Rapid Response team battled to put out the fire. It took 27 firefighters to douse it.

At one stage, farmers were asked to bring in water by tractor to help the firefighters.

Pointing at what looked like a mirage, Ekurhuleni Emergency Services media spokesperson Sugan Moodley said: "It is quite a technical fire. You can't really feel the heat because we are at a safe distance at the moment. There are no visible flames as such, because of the methanol."

At least one of the firefighters had to be given oxygen.

Hours after the accident, firefighters were anticipating a massive explosion as attempts to cool the burning tank full of methanol had failed.

"When we got to the scene it was our priority to stop the tanker burning because of the explosive nature of the chemical it was carrying," said Nel.

Emergency service workers immediately set about cooling down the tank, using water and foam. There were no fire hydrants nearby, so tanks of water had to be brought in.

Hours later, rescue workers were ordered to withdraw from the scene in anticipation of a possible explosion known as a "bleve", or boiling liquid evaporation vacuum explosion, because attempts to cool down the tank had failed.

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