

Mexican gas explosions force shutdowns

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MEXICO CITY --

Honda, Hershey's and other multinational companies temporarily shut down their factories in western Mexico on Wednesday after rebels attacked a key natural gas pipeline.

The small, left-wing guerrilla group that claimed responsibility for the explosions issued a statement late Tuesday vowing to continue the attacks, while the Mexican government scrambled to increase security at "strategic installations" across Mexico.

At least a dozen companies including Honda Motor Co., Kellogg Co.'s, The Hershey Co., Nissan Motor Co., and Grupo Modelo SA were forced to suspend or scale back operations because of the lack of natural gas, the daily newspaper Excelsior reported. They said they faced millions of dollars in losses.

Vitro SAB, a Mexican company that makes glass containers, said the shutdown of two plants would cost it about \$800,000 a day. Vitro said in a statement that it was increasing production at other plants in Mexico to minimize effects on customers.

Total business losses were being estimated at more than 70 million pesos (\$6.4 million) a day, Excelsior reported, citing unidentified sources. The association representing Mexican industry said Wednesday it was looking into the extent of the explosions' financial impact.

Officials from Mexico's state-owned oil and gas monopoly Petroleos Mexicanos, or Pemex, said an explosion Tuesday and two more last week affected different sections of the same pipeline. The company sent 150 workers to repair the line.

The disruption affected clients in the industry-rich city of Guadalajara, capital of the western state of Jalisco; the industrial city of Leon, in the central state of Guanajuato; and the central states of Queretaro and Aguascalientes.

Pemex said the gas would probably not be restored until Friday at the earliest, but was working to provide alternate means of delivery.

Tuesday's explosion caused no injuries but forced the evacuation of communities around the town of Coroneo, near Queretaro's capital, Pemex said. On July 5, two explosions on the same pipeline in Guanajuato also forced evacuations but caused no injuries.

The group that claimed responsibility for the explosions is the "military zone command of the People's Revolutionary Army," or EPR, a tiny rebel group that staged several armed attacks on government and police installations in southern Mexico in the 1990s, but was later weakened by internal divisions.

In a statement issued late Tuesday, the EPR said it was waging a "prolonged people's war."

"We have started a national campaign of harassment against the economic interests of the oligarchy and the anti-people government, and declare those interests as legitimate military targets," it said.

It was impossible to independently verify the statement, which was posted on a Web site that serves as a clearinghouse for bulletins from Latin American armed groups.

The group said it would continue its attacks until the government released Edmundo Reyes Amaya and Raymundo Rivera Bravo, and others it described as political prisoners in the southern state of Oaxaca. Leftist groups took over Oaxaca's capital for five months last year before police took it back and arrested dozens.

But the federal Attorney General's office said Wednesday that neither Reyes nor Rivera had been detained by federal authorities, and that there was no evidence they were in state custody.