2 Exxon fire victims found
1 still missing after Monday morning blaze

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Exxon Refinery crews Monday night found the bodies of two workers killed in an early morning fire that spewed thick smoke and asbestos particles from the plant, a refinery spokesman said.

The search for a third worker, still missing, was to resume this morning, Exxon spokesman Dave Gardner said.

Gardner said the East Baton Rouge Parish coroner was called when the two bodies were found. But the company wouldn't release the names until positive identification has been made.

The third worker also was not identified.

The heavy damage caused by the fire posed access problems for rescue workers Monday night, when the unit had cooled enough to be searched.

Two of the missing workers were Exxon employees and one was identified as a Hall Buck Marine contract employee, Exxon spokesman Walt Eldridge said.

Gardner said "a small amount of asbestos" was found in some spots in a square-mile area east of the plant.

Gardner said that, as a precaution, crews in protective suits would begin this morning picking up the asbestos, described as looking like "pieces of dirty cotton."" 

Plant manager Bill Rainey said Monday's fire occurred in the same coker unit where an April 1 electrical fire critically injured an employee. The April fire was caused primarily by human error, Rainey said.

Monday's fire began at 4:21 a.m. in one of the plant's three coker units and burned out of control for nearly three hours until all sources of fuel were cut off, he said.

"It took a while to find all the right valves," Eldridge said.

Hours after the blaze was reported, firefighters continued to battle small fires that kept sparking up on the unit. By 9:30 p.m., all fires were reported extinguished, a press statement from the refinery said.

Two firefighters were taken to Baton Rouge General Medical Center to be treated for heat exhaustion and others were treated at the scene, Gardner said.

Also, a handful of contract employees were slightly injured trying to escape the flames, he said.

Officials have not yet pinpointed the cause of the blaze, nor in what part of the coker unit it began. The unit was operating normally before the fire, they said.

The three coker units cover a two-acre area in the northwesq quadrant of the 2,100-acre refinery. The damaged unit, built in 1983, processed about 32,000 barrels of asphalt each day into coke, a solid industrial fuel, and other fuels.

The damaged unit is in the center of the three, a 250-foot-tall structure.

Flames shoot from the top of the East Coker Unit at the Exxon Refinery Monday morning, sending thick black smoke into the air. Environmental officials said monitoring equipment did not detect any toxic material in the air at the site fence line.

Photo by Jay Vise, Shadow Traffic

[Image of fire scene]