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Mexican hotel blast kills 5 Canadians, injures 6

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Chloé Fedio and Jennifer Yang
 Staff Reporters

Just days after saying "I do" in a beach ceremony in Mexico, 33-year-old Malcolm Johnson left his new bride and 1-year-old daughter to get a coffee in the lounge of the Grand Riviera Princess hotel.

The British Columbia realtor had one more week of vacation to go when a powerful explosion ripped through his resort hotel on Mexico's posh Riviera Maya, taking his life.

"It was a big event — a wedding, a honeymoon and a holiday all wrapped into one. This is just the worst time," said Ron Williams, who has worked with Johnson at Coast Realty in Nanaimo, B.C.. for the past six years. "We're just shocked. We're in disbelief."



Malcolm Johnson, 33, left, pictured with his wife and daughter, was killed by an explosion at his Mexican resort just days after getting married.

(Were you at the hotel, or do you know someone who was? Contact us at webmaster@thestar.ca)

The Sunday morning explosion killed five Canadians, including a 9-year-old boy, and injured six more, Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon confirmed at a news conference Monday morning.

Mexican authorities say the explosion, which also killed two Mexican workers, was caused by a buildup of gas from a nearby swamp.

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“On behalf of the government and all Canadians, I offer my condolences to the family members and friends of those who lost their lives and wish a quick recovery to those who were injured,” Cannon said.

The blast at the 676-room hotel in Playa del Carmen blew out windows and ceiling panels and hurled paving stones

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and chunks of metal 50 metres onto the palm-fringed lawn of the compound.

A metre-deep crater has replaced the resort's premium platinum lounge, located in one of a dozen or so buildings that make up the sprawling hotel.

Elgin Barron of Guelph, Ont., was among the five Canadians killed in the blast, his employer, Cambridge-based Com Dev International Ltd., confirmed.

He was a quiet man in his 50s who grew roses, rode his motorcycle on weekends and was always willing to lend his neighbours a helping hand, said Paul Robinson who has lived kitty-corner to Barron on Imperial Rd. for 22 years.

Barron was once married, but has lived alone for about 15 years, Robinson said.

"He was very friendly — always a smile and a wave when he passed you on the street," Robinson said. "He was a good neighbour."

Chris Charmont, 41, and his 9-year-old son, John, from Drumheller, Alta., were also killed when they left their room to get some juice. His sister, Debbie Moore, said that Charmont was on vacation with his wife, Tara, and their 10-year-old daughter, Meagan.

"I don't know what to say, because we're just crushed, really," Moore said on Sunday. "They were a very close family. They did everything for their kids."

A 51-year-old Edmonton-area woman, Darlene Ferguson, died in hospital after the explosion, her family confirmed. She was in Mexico for her son's wedding.

Another Com Dev employee, Larry Smith, was also injured in the explosion; his wife, Linda, who also works at Com Dev, was at the resort but is unharmed.

Grief counsellors were brought in to Com Dev Monday morning to help employees cope with the tragedy, said company CEO Mike Pley.

Barron, a sub-contract manager, has been at the company for 14 years and Smith for 23 years, Pley said.

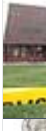
"This is a shock," he said. "We're just trying to support the families as best as we can. (Barron) obviously was a popular and well-respected member of the staff."

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Mexican media reported that the other dead were Sergio Villegas Márquez and Eduardo Flores.

Two Canadians remain in critical condition in Mexico, Cannon said. He added that the government of Mexico would be investigating the cause of the explosion.

“It’s an unfortunate accident. There’s been loss of life and it is a tragedy. But I’m sure that in the next couple of weeks and months, the government of Mexico will be able to cast and shed all of the light on this incident,” Cannon said.

Francisco Alor, attorney general of Quintana Roo, the state where the resort is located, told local media that investigations were under way to see whether the hotel building, which sat on a concrete pad on a swampy area near the beach, had been properly constructed.

“The report suggests an accumulation of gases produced by decomposing organic material in the subsoil, and this gas produced the explosion,” Alor said. “Expert examiners and civil defence personnel will have to determine if the underground space filled with swampy water that remained in this zone when the building was constructed four years ago, could have generated this type of gases.”

Officials said no gas lines were located in the area where the blast occurred.

Stephanie Scola, a 23-year-old Vaughan woman who stayed at the Grand Riviera Princess hotel this past July, said an unpleasant odor wafted up from the tree-covered swamp, which flowed through part of the resort near her room.

“In the morning when we would go out on the balcony to have a coffee, the smell was unbearable. We couldn’t even sit out there,” Scola said. “We didn’t know what the smell could have been but it was very, very strong.”

The resort was hosting a large number of Canadians, including at least one wedding and a company vacation when the blast occurred.

A Facebook album of the Johnson’s wedding was posted by his aunt just one day ago.

“My nephew Malcolm and his beautiful bride, what a magical ceremony in Playa Des Carmen. Love you both xoxo,” Debra Johnson wrote.

Back in B.C., Gary Bowen received a text message that his colleague was missing after Sunday’s explosion. Hours later, the news came that Johnson had been killed.

Johnson’s coworkers recalled how the proud father used to pull out his iPhone to show videos of his family.

“He would show us video clips of his daughter,” Williams said. “Loved his family, just loved his family.”

Pete Travers, program director of *570 News Radio* in Kitchener, Ont., was at the hotel with a large group of Canadians from nearby Waterloo. He said all members of his group were accounted for.

Travers recalled hearing a huge crash before he went down for breakfast. He stepped into the hallway to find people running from the blast site as word of an explosion rippled across the resort.

“There was quite a lot of chaos,” Travers said. He and a few other guests rushed to grab deck chairs from the pool area to use as makeshift stretchers.

Carson Arthur, a tourist from Toronto, said the force of the blast knocked everyone to the floor and sucked the air out of the rooms.

“The velocity of the air coming back was incredible, so people were thrown around all over the place in the rooms and hallways,” Arthur, 39, said in a phone interview from the resort. “There were several people in the debris. There were a lot of people wounded from flying glass.”

James Gaade of St. Catharines, Ont., was walking on the beach when he heard a loud explosion and saw smoke coming from the resort’s premium platinum lounge.

“Everyone said their hotel room shook. The glass at neighbouring restaurants all cracked and blew out. The tiki hut that was in the area was on fire,” he said. “There was a large crater in the area, debris.”

WestJet Airlines confirmed Monday that three of their guests were among the five Canadians killed. Spokesman Robert Palmer said 400 of the travellers currently staying at the Grand Princess Riviera booked their vacations through WestJet.

The Calgary-based airline sent a rescue flight to Mexico at about midnight Sunday, along with grief counsellors and a special assistance team. The rescue plane has 136 seats and will be returning to Calgary Monday night, Palmer said.

Other WestJet guests hoping to fly back to other Canadian cities will be placed on regularly scheduled flights Tuesday, he said.

With files from The Canadian Press and Associated Press