

Sheriff: Up to 20 evacuees may be dead in bus fire

Residents were leaving Houston ahead of Hurricane Rita

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A news helicopter captured images of the burning bus early Friday near Dallas, Texas.

DALLAS, Texas (CNN) -- A bus carrying as many as 45 elderly hurricane evacuees from Houston exploded in flames Friday south of Dallas, killing as many as 20 people, police said.

Dallas County Sheriff's Sgt. Don Peritz said 14 to 15 people got off the bus and said as many as 20 others may have died.



Peritz said the incident is believed to have started with a mechanical problem -- a brake that caught on fire.

The bus pulled to the side of Interstate 45 and people were getting off when there was a series of explosions believed to have been caused by oxygen canisters being carried by the evacuees.

A witness told CNN affiliate WFAA that he saw the bus explode and that he helped people who were breaking out windows trying to escape.

The witness said the people on the bus were evacuees leaving Houston as Hurricane Rita approached the Texas coast.

Dozens of ambulances responded to the incident and rescuers could be seen treating the injured on the side of the expressway.

The highway, which is jammed with traffic as residents of Houston attempt to flee from Hurricane Rita, was blocked.

