Chicago Tribune, September 29, 1983





Tribune photos by Jerry Pomerson

Two firefighters catch their breath after fighting a fire in the First National Bank building Wednesday. At left, the 57-story structure towers over firefighters manning a ladder to one of the lower floors

Toxic smoke forces evacuation of bank

By Michael Arndt and Henry Wood

A FIRE IN AN underground electrical transformer in the First National Bank of Chicago complex Wednesday caused a spill of toxic PCBs, prompting authorities to evacuate as many as 10,000 people from the bank's 57-story headquarters.

Fearful that PCBs may have been carried in the smoke, authorities also closed the bank's outdoor plaza and the four streets around the building, snarling evening rush-hour traffic in the Loop.

No traces of the toxic chemical were found inside the bank, Commonwealth Edison Co. officials said Wednesday night after an inspection of the structure by its environmental team.

The fire, which greatly damaged two transformers, halved the power supply to the bank, but Tony Zehnder, a bank spokesman, said no vital banking records stored on computers were reported lost because of the outage.

ZEHNDER SAID the building will be open for business Thursday morning.

Seven people, including two firemen, suffered from smoke inhalation. The firemen, Richard Kelly, 55, and Lenwood Cross, 30, both of the 1st Battalion, were in fair condition in Northwestern Memorial

Continued on page 4, this section

MONS 019346



Tribune photo by Jerry Tomasek

Firefighters evacuate a victim of the fire in an electrical transformer near the First National Bank building.

Bank fire

Continued from page 1, this section

Hospital. The others were treated and released.

The cause of the fire hadn't been determined, according to utility and fire officials.

The fire was the second in the Loop Wednesday. The 11-story Loop College, 30 E. Lake St., was evacuated after a fire broke out in an eighth floor supply room, sending hundreds of students and faculty members into the streets.

THE BANK transformer fire was noticed shortly after 1:30 p.m. John Hogan, Edison director of news information, said the fire occurred in a utility vault three stories below the street.

Four transformers in the vault, under the sidewalk at Monroe and Clark Streets, immediately south of First Place Banking Center, carry power to the First National Bank building, Hogan said.

PCBs, or polychlorinated biphenyls, are used as a lubricant in the transformers. Hogan said there were about 250 gallons of oil containing PCBs in the vault and about 15 gallons leaked onto the floor in the fire.

Hogan said all of the spilled chemical apparently was confined to the vault. The PCBs were later neutralized by Edison work crews who, wearing special protective coveralls, spread bags of absorbent material on the chemical.

AS SMOKE seeped from the sidewalk and the building's third-floor air ducts, authorities evacuated the bank's three basement floors and its lobby and second floor, where public transactions are conducted.

By 4:30 p.m. the entire building had been emptied floor by floor, Zehnder said. "The evacuation was calm," said Susan Mielnoczek, a receptionist, who said she walked down from the 20th floor.

The fire was quickly extinguished after the sidewalk was broken open to vent the smoldering blaze.