

Electronics firm facing criminal charge in blast

By Brandon Bailey
Mercury News Staff Writer

Prosecutors have charged a Palo Alto electronics firm with a misdemeanor for allegedly failing to notify authorities immediately when a canister of toxic arsenic gas exploded in a furnace last month.

It is the first such incident in Santa Clara County that has led to charges under a year-old law that requires notification of authorities whenever potentially hazardous materials are released, said Deputy District Attorney Jerry Nadler. General Instrument Corp. of Palo Alto was named in the criminal complaint filed Thursday, said Nadler, head of the district attorney's toxic enforcement office. The firm could face a fine up to \$25,000, he said.

A company official said the firm doesn't believe it has violated the law. "We do feel that we did everything right," said Walter Stewart, general manager of the company. The charge stems from a Dec. 15 incident in which a quartz ampule containing about 10 grams of arsenic exploded inside a furnace at the General Instrument plant, 3400 Hillview Ave.

Company spokesmen said a specially trained team of employees responded immediately by evacuating the plant and organizing a cleanup effort. One worker suffered minor burns from the explosion; there were no reported injuries stemming from the arsenic release.

But Palo Alto fire officials said they were concerned because the incident occurred at 7:20 a.m. and firefighters weren't notified until 8:55 a.m.

"The evidence suggests there

was adequate time for them to notify the local fire department, and they failed to do so," Nadler said.

He praised what he said is a trend among electronics companies toward organizing their own "emergency response teams" to handle such incidents.

"However, they are only a first line of defense," he said. "They are not intended and should not be considered as a replacement for the local fire department."

While there is no indication that the company failed to perform an adequate evacuation and cleanup, Nadler said it is the fire department's legal responsibility to oversee such efforts.

A hearing on the case is scheduled for Jan. 30 in Palo Alto Municipal Court.

Educator appointed to senator's advisory panel on child care

Jose Lopez, a child development director in the Santa Clara Unified School District, has been appointed by state Sen. Rebecca Morgan to serve on her child care advisory committee.

The 20-member committee provides information on problems and concerns to the senator, who represents San Mateo County and portions of Santa Clara County. It also will help propose legislation on child care.

Lopez, 56, is vice president of the California Child Development Advisory Association's northern section and has been an administrator in the Santa Clara school district since 1975.