

# Over 300 feared killed in Indian train disaster

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Over 300 passengers are feared dead and hundreds more injured after two crowded trains collided head on at Gaisal station, 500 kilometres (315 miles) north of the West Bengal capital, Calcutta, in the northeast of India. It is one of the most horrible railway accidents to happen in the country. Rescuers and hospital officials said that 257 bodies had been recovered by Tuesday evening. But the death toll is likely to go up as 50 more people are believed to be trapped in the remaining wreckage.

As the mass anger grew over the train tragedy it was reported that Nitish Kumar, the Minister of Railways in the BJP (Bharatiya Janatha Party)-led government, has offered to resign from his post. However, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has refused to accept the resignation. Almost all the major Indian newspapers published reports and editorials criticising present and past governments for the repeated railway tragedies.

The disaster happened when the Delhi-bound Brahmaputra Mail and the Awadh-Assam Express heading to Guwahati, the capital in the northeastern state of Assam, collided at 1.55 am. Monday, August 2. The twisted metal bodies of the train cars were piled on one another, with many hundreds trapped inside.

"The groans of agonised survivors who were trapped in the mangled coaches were heart-wrenching as rescuers tried to cut through the mangled steel," The *Hindustan Times* reported. "Waiting survivors rummaged through the debris among blood soaked heaps of human flesh to look for their loved ones."

The railway authorities were unable to arrange a crane until Monday evening and metal-cutting machines were delayed for hours, it was reported, slowing rescue operations. More victims, without timely medical treatment, succumbed to death as a result. The situation was even more serious because of the lack of facilities in hospitals. The West Bengal police minister said that the authorities were "facing a shortage of space at the hospitals to keep injured and at the medical college [North Bengal Medical College Hospital at Silguri] morgue to store the bodies." He admitted that there was also a shortage of blood.

Railway officials earlier reported that the crash occurred

due to a bomb blast. Later this was ruled out. Among those killed were about 100 personnel of the Border Security Forces (BSF) and Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). The fire which engulfed two coaches, extinguished after much effort, may have occurred due to explosives accompanying the security forces.

Railway Minister Kumar, visiting the injured on Monday at a local hospital, was said to have expressed "surprise" over "how two trains came on the same track when there is a double line here." But railway accidents, many of them major disasters, are not uncommon in India. The railway network is the main lifeline of economic activity and social ties for the more than 1 billion people in the country. The Indian rail network stretches 107,000 kilometres (66,800 miles) and an estimated 13 million ride each day.

During the last five years, as with the new policy of opening up the Indian economy to international capital, railway traffic has surged. Modernisation, however, has been slow. During this period there have been 15 major train accidents, with death tolls ranging from 20 to 300.

Compiling details about railway accidents during past decade, the BBC reported that more than 300 people died in three separate accidents in 1998. Last month 17 people were killed and 200 injured when a passenger train collided with a freight train near Delhi.

The following major train accidents with high death tolls have been reported:

- \* In Bihar on June 6, 1981, 800 people were killed when a cyclone blew a train from the track into a river

- \* On August 16, 1984, a train fell from a bridge near Charegaon, killing 112

- \* An accident in Kerala in July 1988 killed 109 passengers

- \* In August 1995, a collision in Uttar Pradesh claimed 300 lives

- \* In Madhya Pradesh, 81 died when an express train crashed into a river in September 1997

- \* In another accident in Uttar Pradesh, in January 1998, 50 passengers were killed

- \* In November 1998, in a train crash in Punjab, 200 were killed

Hundreds more people were injured in these accidents.

The railway minister, visiting the scene of the accident on Monday, announced Rs. 400,000 (US\$9,300) would be paid as compensation and an immediate grant of Rs. 25,000 (US\$581) would be provided to the next of kin of each victim. He claimed "human error" was the root cause of the disaster. This is usually what railway ministers say when a disastrous train crash occurs. But facts speak counter to this face-saving claim.

A former member of the Board of Railways, M.K. Mishra, pointing to the systemic crisis in the Indian railways, said, "Freight traffic has gone up by 620 percent and passenger traffic by 514 percent since 1951, while inputs into increasing capacity have gone up only by 200 percent."

"The increase in density of traffic means the reaction time of the railway staff is reduced and the stress and strain on them is increased," another former Railway Board member, C.M. Koshla, told Reuters.

This means that the ruling governments in India since independence failed to improve the railway system inherited from their British colonial masters and update it with modern technology. Air and motor traffic accidents have increased in recent years with changed economic activity, because the successive governments were not providing investment to improve the infrastructure. Last year the railway minister admitted in a parliamentary debate that even routine inspections and maintenance had been hampered because of lack of funds. Even though a high level task force was set up to "select" modern technology for railway improvements, officials have admitted it could take two to three years to implement the program.

The railway minister, before resigning, announced that the government would appoint a committee to "inquire" into the causes of the accident. Appointing committees for "investigations", giving compensation for victims and terming the cause of accident as a "human error" are nothing but face-saving rituals and an attempt to seek scapegoats in order to cover up the reasons behind the tragedy. The BJP government is trying to hide the real hard issues from the masses.

Only last November, more than 200 people died when the Jammu-Sealdah Express rammed into the derailed Golden Temple Frontier Mail. An inquiry into the crash concluded that rail fracture had been the main cause of the accident, and found Chief Engineer of North Railways S.M. Singhla negligent for not conducting regular ultrasonic scanning to detect the fractures. Two others were also found at fault, but nine months later, only the most junior of the three has been suspended. A senior rail official commented: "How was he expected to do his job when the ultrasonic scanning machines were not available with him? It is a policy failure."

Sharply criticising the face-saving *inquiry* the *Express* declared in an editorial on August 3: "The death toll in the collision between Brahmaputra Mail and the Awadh-Assam Express will set a new record in a country where railway accidents no longer make news unless the casualty list is in three figures. And how shall the ministry react? An unknown signal man might be suspended and a signal-box accused of criminal malfunction, but that would be the limit."

The next of kin of the victims are paid with *ex-gratia* payments, the editorial continued: "Ex-gratia: 'out of grace', in a dead language. In contemporary idiom, a handout, such as is given to beggar.... It is no wonder that the big guns of the Railways are so insouciant. It is they who are the criminals, not the hapless signalman who will be hauled up after Monday's tragedy is investigated."

The Indian Railway is one of the government enterprises which has been named by the IMF for "restructuring"—another name for privatisation, or measures leading up to privatisation. Recently IMF budget adviser for India, A. Rangachari, writing in the *Hindu* newspaper, placed the railway among other public enterprises faced with "reducing expenditure subsidies". This is the cause of lack of funds for the improvement of railway as in other public enterprises.

In some quarters the latest accident is being cited as proof of the necessity of privatising the railway network. Speaking to the French news agency AFP, the Railway Ministry secretary said that the sheer size of India's railway network is the main barrier to improving safety. The same editorial of the *Indian Express* wrote, "If the babus in their bungalows cannot handle the rail network on their own, they should have the vision to seek private involvement."

But reduction of subsidies and expenditure, carried out on the instructions of international capital, which seeks privatisation for profits, is itself the main cause of the railway crisis in India.



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