

Britain's Paddington rail crash claims 27 lives

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Twenty-seven people are confirmed dead and 150 injured in Britain's worst rail crash for a decade in London on Tuesday morning. Up to 50 more are feared dead.

Two trains, carrying rush hour commuters, collided and burst into flames near Paddington Station, West London. Six of the injured are on life support, and police report that other bodies remain in the trains. Both train drivers were killed in the crash. It is the highest death toll in a UK rail accident since the Clapham disaster in December 1988, when 35 people lost their lives.

According to early reports, at 08.11 a two-carriage commuter service run by Thames Trains from Paddington to Bedwyn in Wiltshire collided with the incoming Great Western 125-express train from Cheltenham. The crash occurred on the same stretch of line as the Southall rail crash in 1997, which killed seven people and injured 150.

One train burst into flames. Eyewitnesses reported that columns of smoke could be seen across West London as a result of the impact, with people screaming and crying as fire engulfed the carriage. St. Mary's Hospital, Paddington had to cancel all outpatient appointments and the wounded were ferried around London hospitals, many suffering with burns. At least 18 people were thought to be seriously injured. It was not until 13.00 hours that the London Fire Brigade could announce that all the trapped passengers had been released.

Mark Rogers, a passenger on the Thames Trains commuter service, said: "There was an almighty crash and the train rolled over and over, first onto its roof and then onto its side. One woman I saw was thrown out of the window and she was trapped beneath the train. She was at least very severely injured." The carriage behind the driver was "ripped apart like a sardine can", he said, and was lying, eight feet in the air, on top of the

125-express train. Another passenger, Ian Lees, reported, "It seemed like we went right through the middle of the Thames train. There were a lot of people burnt. The people who suffered the worst were the Thames passengers. We went right through the middle of them at speed." Chris Goodall, who was walking through the first class compartment on the incoming London train, said that he and other passengers had tried to help the driver of the train, who was semiconscious and trapped in his cab.

The crash immediately reopened long-standing complaints about declining safety standards on Britain's rail services. Chris Jackson, deputy editor of the *Railway Gazette International*, said that the latest collision was "almost certainly an exact repeat" of the Southall accident, with a train crossing the tracks and another colliding into it.

Lawyers acting for the bereaved relatives of the Southall disaster said they would demand that the latest crash be incorporated into the ongoing public inquiry of the 1997 incident. The inquiry into the Southall crash, which happened when a Great Western train from Swansea to Paddington crashed into an empty freight train on September 19, 1997, officially opened in February 1998, but was almost immediately adjourned. It resumed last Monday.

In the interim, charges of corporate manslaughter against Great Western were dropped, even though a court heard that neither of the safety systems on board the train were working at the time of the accident. The company pleaded guilty to failing to provide transport to the public "in such a way as to ensure that they were not exposed to risks to their health and safety". It was fined £1.5 million—a sum condemned by victims' relatives as an insult to the dead and injured. After the case, Louise Christian, head of a steering group of solicitors handling claims, said the amount "will not hurt Great Western Trains in any way", and that

relatives felt the case had been a "token prosecution".

Following Tuesday's disaster, Christian said, "We feel awful that because of a two-year delay due to unsuccessful criminal prosecutions; the [Southall] inquiry has not been completed before this tragic demonstration of the need for urgent action on train safety."

As long ago as December 1988, the Hidden Inquiry into the Clapham Junction rush hour crash had recommended the installation of automatic train protection (ATP) across the rail network to prevent such accidents. But ATP is still not in force. At the time of the Hidden Inquiry, the then Tory government ruled out the £750 million cost as too expensive when it was preparing to privatise the rail network. They calculated that the ATP system would cost £14 million per life saved—a bill they were not prepared to pay. Failure to implement ATP led to the Southall crash.

Safety fell further behind following the privatisation of the rail system two years ago, which divided the previously state-run British Rail network into "Railtrack" and 25 separate train-operating companies. Areas of responsibility were divided between the two—a form of horizontal separation that meant there is no single body responsible for lines, signals and trains. Railtrack became responsible for the first two, whilst maintenance work was subcontracted out. The trains became the property of three rolling-stock companies, whilst competing private companies won the right to run train services by renting line space and trains.

Health and Safety Executive (HSE) officials have consistently criticised the decline in maintenance standards. HSE's deputy chief inspector of railways, Dr. Bob Smallwood, earlier reported "significant weaknesses in industry systems and in how effectively they are followed". Signal Passed at Danger (SPAD) incidents are reported to have risen 8 percent over the last year, following five years of decline. In the 1990s, 17 people have been killed and 250 injured as a result of SPAD incidents.

Following the Paddington crash Railtrack stated: "The railway industry accepts full responsibility for the dreadful incident." Labour's Transport Secretary John Prescott said there would be a public inquiry into the crash, but a department official later declined to set a date for the hearing. The cost of implementing a full ATP system today is estimated at more than £1 billion.

Blair's Labour government proposed a cheap and less effective variant—the Train Protection Warning System—but gave the year 2004 as the deadline for its implementation.



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