

70 confirmed dead and 100 still unaccounted for in London train crash

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Some 70 people are known to have died and a further 100 are still unaccounted for in what looks like Britain's worst rail tragedy for more than 80 years, according to reports Thursday.

Metropolitan Police Deputy Commissioner Andy Trotter said: "We are particularly concerned about a core of 70 people who were seen by family or friends to get on the trains. We are facing a terrible situation. Although we know there are 70 people who may have been on that train, we do not think it will be possible to recover any further bodies because of the fire. Visual searches of the carriages have been made and no further bodies can be seen."

So far, only 28 bodies have been recovered from the crash that took place Tuesday morning. Two trains, carrying rush hour commuters, collided and burst into flames near Paddington station, West London.

Chris Goodhall, managing director of Demon, the UK's oldest Internet service provider, was one of the few people to escape from the first class carriage at the front of the Great Western express after it collided with a commuter service pulling out of Paddington station. Mr. Goodhall said that he saw only "four or five" others struggle free.

It is estimated that up to 70 passengers could have been in the 48-seat first class carriage "H." Being regular commuters, many would have moved to the very front of the train as they approached the end of their journey. As the Great Western train struck the oncoming Thames service, carriage H was engulfed in a raging inferno, which reached temperatures of over 1,000 degrees Celsius.

As relatives of the crash victims began to gather at the scene of the tragedy, details of how the events of Tuesday morning happened began to emerge.

Examination of the track and signals has confirmed

that the collision was triggered by the Thames commuter train going through a red signal at Portobello Junction, 1,000 yards east of the crash site. Investigators believe that the Thames train was on line three of the six-track section. This means that when it missed the red signal, the train then carried on along a stretch of line that ran parallel to line two, the line on which the Great Western express was approaching. This could have been the position when the drivers of the two trains saw each other, which explains some eyewitness accounts that reported an absence of braking before the incident.

The driver of the Thames train had only been qualified for two months, after an 11-month training period. He may have been unaware that line three would not take him past the oncoming express, but instead ended in a sharp left turn, merging with line two. Rail inspectors believe that the Thames train reached this junction at almost the same split-second as the express.

The Thames driver who was killed in the collision has been identified as 31-year-old Michael Hodder from Reading, Berkshire. He leaves behind a wife and two children, aged seven and four. The driver of the express train is still "missing, presumed dead".

Initial attempts to attribute the crash to "driver error" fell flat once it emerged that Signal 109, the one that the Thames train is said to have passed at danger, had already been identified by Railtrack as posing a clear safety risk more than 18 months ago. Drivers leaving Paddington complained that the signal dipped in and out of view because of the location of new overhead power masts. A group of Railtrack managers and rail inspectors proposed measures to improve sighting, including ground-level markers intended to remind drivers which line they were on and prevent them

confusing Signal 109 with adjacent signals governing other lines. These recommendations were never fully implemented. Railtrack claim this was because they required endorsement from the Public Inquiry into the 1997 Southall crash. The inquiry into Southall, 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. The train drivers union Aslef has said that Railtrack had removed flashing lights that would have warned drivers they were approaching a signal. Some 600 trains have passed through red lights on Britain's railways in the past 12 months.

Discussion has now turned to the politically sensitive topic of Automatic Train Protection (ATP) systems, which could have prevented both the Paddington crash and that at Southall two years ago. The system-wide implementation of ATP was recommended by an inquiry into the Clapham Junction train crash that killed 35 people in 1988. It was rejected by the then Tory government on grounds of cost. Labour's Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott also ruled out ATP on the same basis, proposing a cheaper and less efficient system known as the Train Protection Warning System (TPWS).

A public inquiry is to be headed by Lord Cullen, a Scottish judge who headed the two-year investigation into the Piper Alpha disaster in 1988 when the North Sea oil platform caught fire and exploded, killing 167 of the 228 workers on board.

In a dramatic about-face, which can only be explained by the explosive political implications of the Paddington disaster, Prescott told BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme that he would find the money—up to £1 billion—to fund the ATP system if Lord Cullen's inquiry deemed it necessary. "I want the best safety system as quickly as I can get it implemented, as quickly as I can get it—and £1 billion is not a big consideration to achieve that," he said.

At the same time, however, Prescott has commissioned an investigation into comparative protective/warning systems independently of the Cullen inquiry. Headed by Sir David Davies, the president of the Royal Academy of Engineering, the investigation should present an initial report by Christmas. It is believed that Davies' report may argue for the cheaper

TPWS on the grounds that it could be implemented more quickly than ATP. Railtrack, who assumed responsibility for signal and track safety following privatisation, has already voiced this argument. Chief Executive Gerald Corbett said that while ATP "might be a better solution long-term", it would take a long time to bring in. He said he would push for the introduction of TPWS to be accelerated. "We haven't got the time so we have to go with what we've got", he said.

There are indications that the introduction of ATP could face stiff resistance from rail bosses, even if Prescott were to honour his pledge to have the Treasury foot the bill for its installation. According to a report commissioned by Railtrack, made public Wednesday night, Great Western Trains management had been reluctant to use ATP. It regarded the system "at best, as an inconvenience to the efficient running of the trains". The report, which was detailed on Channel 4 news, claimed that it slowed drivers down and even alleges that there were "hints" that some drivers had tried to damage ATP equipment. The report was compiled by the Electrowatt Engineering company and was delivered to Railtrack days after the Southall rail crash in 1997, Channel 4 reported.

The opposition that is unconvincingly attributed to drivers can be correctly ascribed to the rail bosses. It is they who believe that questions of safety must not be allowed to get in the way of the "efficiency", i.e., profitability, of the trains.



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