

Norwegian train crash forces evacuation of town

Steve James
8 April 2000

A runaway freight train collided with another freight carrier at 1:00 a.m. Wednesday morning in the Norwegian town of Lillestrom. The crash occurred 12 miles north of the capital Oslo, in the town's railway station, and ruptured one of two 46 tonne propane tanks carried by the moving train, causing a fire and threatening a massive explosion.

The accident appears to have been triggered by a partial brake failure on the train carrying the propane as it approached Lillestrom station, hitting a stationary goods train on the same track. Both trains were operated by the state freight carrier NSB Gods, and were equipped with an automatic train stop system (ATS) that should have prevented the collision. ATS is triggered when a train passes a red light.

Initial reports suggest that the ATS operated successfully, but the brakes then failed on the approaching train, which coasted down a hill into the station, ramming the stationary train at around 50 km/h. The moving train's engineer sounded his whistle in an attempt to warn the other driver of the approaching danger, jumping back into the engine room only seconds before the crash. Fortunately both drivers survived and no one else was injured.

The driver told the *Dagbladet* newspaper, "You can imagine how it feels when you sit behind the controls of a train without brakes....The only thought I had was to stop the train."

The escaping propane ignited immediately, forcing the authorities to evacuate 2,000 local people, including residents from the nearby town of Raelingen. Some complained that the police delayed evacuation until dawn, many hours after the accident occurred.

By Thursday evening the residents were still barred from returning to their homes and businesses. Leaking propane was still on fire, threatening a blast capable of

razing the centre of Lillestrom, with a population of 25,000. A hospital, school and prison are within the 600-metre possible blast radius. Although latest reports suggested that the likelihood of an explosion was receding, burning off the remaining propane could take many more hours and the fire could burn for days.

The fact that the propane quickly caught fire may actually have reduced the chances of a catastrophic explosion, as escaping gas is quickly burnt. Had the gas leaked without igniting, the chances of a spark igniting all the gas at once would have been greater. But surprise has been expressed that a relatively low speed impact should cause propane tanks to rupture at all.

Fire fighters on the scene estimated that around one half of the burning tank's cargo of propane had been burnt off, while 5,000 litres of water an hour were being poured onto the intact tank. Fire fighters were considering whether to allow the remaining gas to burn off, or whether to remove it in a risky insertion of an emergency valve into the burning tank.

Transport disruption in the surrounding area has been acute, as Lillestrom is a key transport interchange used by the express service to Oslo airport, among others.

The accident comes only four months after another train crash in Norway in which 19 people died, the worst death toll since 1975. In that crash, two passenger trains—one an express travelling at high speed—crashed on the Rørosbanen line at Aasta in the Trondheim area. Both train drivers and 17 passengers died in the ensuing fire, which burned for many hours. Following the accident, drivers boycotted the line until safety and staffing levels were improved.

It subsequently emerged that the Rørosbanen track was one of two lines without an ATS system, which would have triggered the express train's brakes after it jumped the red signal. ATS installation was supposed

to have been implemented by the end of last year at a cost of between 10 and 15 million Norwegian kroner.

Neither of the trains was even equipped with audio signalling gear, which could have prevented the crash. Signalling staff realised an accident was imminent but were powerless to prevent it. Installation of audio equipment had been recommended in a Foundation for Scientific and Industrial Research report, commissioned after another crash at Nordstrand as long ago as 1993.

Two reports by the Norwegian Railway Inspectorate criticised the railway operators NSB and administrators Jernbaneverket for running trains in violation of safety legislation. The reports noted 22 breaches of safety in the Region Nord, including the Rørosbanen line that violated the Railway Act. Other reports noted that some of the coaches involved in the accident were up to 40 years old, and that this had contributed to the fierce fires which left emergency service workers unable to help the injured people still alive inside the burning coaches.



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