

Hundreds dead in Egyptian rail disaster

Liz Smith**22 February 2002**

More than 373 people have been killed in Egypt's worst ever rail disaster. Thousands of people were crammed on to the 23.30 Cairo to Luxor train on February 18, many of them returning home to their villages to celebrate the Eid al Adha, the largest Muslim festival of the year marking the annual pilgrimage, or Hajj, to Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

It is rumoured that the fire began in a small cooking stove. It tore through the last seven carriages due to the windows being opened because of the heat caused by the overcrowding. The weight of numbers meant that many were trapped on the train, with bars over the windows preventing their escape. Most of those who died were burned to death. Other passengers jumped from the burning train, but were killed on the line.

A large number of children are amongst the dead. When the fire broke out the electricity failed, leaving many scrambling to escape in darkness. Bodies of victims attempting to flee were piled up at the ends of two carriages. Firefighters said that some of the corpses were found curled up under seats, believing this would protect them.

The train travelled in flames for four miles due to the train driver being unaware of the fire, before finally stopping near al-Ayyat, 46 miles out of Cairo. It took firefighters several hours to put out the blaze. Survivors described the horrific scene to Egypt's official Middle East News Agency (MENA). One told of how, "We pushed each other and we were suffocating from the smoke. We threw each other out of the windows."

Another, Saleh Selim, said, "I was overwhelmed by the smoke and tongues of flame lashing out at me. So I jumped out of the window of the moving train."

Whilst Prime Minister Atef Obeid is definitive about the cause of the tragedy, i.e. a passenger trying to heat food, Ahmed al-Sherif, director of the state-owned Egyptian Railway Authority, said the cause had not yet been determined. He insisted that the train was free of

technical faults and was carrying fire extinguishers.

In anticipation of an angry reaction from relatives of the victims, security forces have been put on alert and surround the scene of the fire. President Hosni Mubarak has also issued orders for a rapid investigation into the circumstances of the accident, and for assistance to be provided to the victims.

Obeid said the government, "has mobilised all its efforts to help the families of the victims and alleviate their suffering." He also defended the railway by stating, "All trains are in good shape and at the highest degree of efficiency and they are reviewed completely and regularly."

Egypt has a comprehensive rail network and for those who can afford it there is a high standard rail service, with air-conditioned first class or sleeper trains that mainly cater for tourists. Most Egyptians, however, travel packed into cramped compartments on old and slow moving trains, taking livestock and large amounts of luggage with them. The wood and metal carriages of the train were built to take 150, but were holding 300 at the time of the fire.

Whilst this is the worst rail accident in Egypt's 150 years of railways, accidents are a regular event. The worst previous fire occurred in October 1998, when 50 people were killed and more than 80 injured as a train derailed and ran into a busy market square.

The presence of security forces at the scene indicates the enormous social tensions now developing throughout Egypt, especially in the main cities. Two weeks ago the Consultative Group Meeting for Egypt jointly organised by the Egyptian government and the World Bank, agreed to a £10.3 billion-rescue package for Egypt's ailing economy. The deal includes demands for the restructuring of the Egyptian economy, which is bound to have a negative impact on the already deteriorating infrastructure of the largest country in the Middle East.



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