

Train crash in Mozambique kills 200

Barry Mason
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Around 200 people were killed and many hundreds injured on May 25, when a train crashed on the line between the capital of Mozambique, Maputo, and Ressano Garcia on the South African border.

Reports agree that the immediate cause of the crash was due to passenger carriages running down an incline and crashing into stationary freight wagons carrying cement. The carriages had been disconnected from the wagons and left by the driver. He then took the wagons to a station lower down the hill, intending to return later for the carriages. Stones were used by the driver as a brake, with the intention of stopping the passenger carriages rolling down the hill. However, it seems the stones gave way and the carriages rolled down at speed into the cement wagons.

The resultant crash was the worst rail disaster in Mozambican history. As the carriages slammed into the wagons, powder cement was released, burying dozens of people alive. Two of the carriages were completely destroyed by the impact. Press reports from survivors and rescuers described a horrific scene with dozens of mutilated bodies. Rescue workers toiling throughout the day described how people were dying in their arms because they could not free them quickly enough.

Ambulances and private cars took injured passengers to the hospital in Maputo, with reports of many dying on the way or whilst waiting to be treated at the hospital.

A *South African Mail and Guardian* report explains that the disaster reveals the desperate state of medical facilities in Mozambique. There were outbreaks of malaria and cholera earlier in the year, which has seriously depleted supplies. The hospital has also been short of blood and ran out completely in December. There was an urgent appeal for blood donors to treat victims of the crash.

Even the central morgue in Maputo was unable to hold all the bodies. It can currently only store 50 bodies

because of a faulty cooling system, but had 98 bodies in store as a result of the crash. The hospital authorities put out an urgent appeal to the relatives of those killed in the accident to collect the bodies.

The government was quick to blame the driver of the train and rail workers in general for the disaster. Transport minister Tomas Salomao declared, "An investigation is under way, but at first glance the crash was caused by human error." Salomao accepted that investment in the rail system was needed, but claimed the main point was educating workers in safety. "The driver of this locomotive was an official with 30 years experience," he said. "We need to locate all personnel and retrain them."

Mozambican President Joachim Chissano declared three days of mourning for the people killed in the disaster and stated that it was necessary to wait for the results of an inquiry before blaming anyone. But he also implied the workforce was responsible, saying, "Conductors should learn from mistakes like this."

A spokesman for the national rail company claimed that the line was in reasonable condition and that train safety had improved over recent years, but reports of the crash, whilst contradictory, suggest that there were serious technical problems with the train. BBC reports based on information from the Mozambique Railway Company state that the train was unable to climb a steep incline in the mountainous area. Associated Press reports state that the train developed mechanical problems as it was descending a long hill. Neither the politicians nor the rail officials address the issue of why the passenger carriages could not be held stationary with their own brakes, without the use of stones.

Fatal accidents are a regular occurrence on Mozambique railways, due to the decayed infrastructure. The floods of 1999 and 2000 wreaked havoc and seriously affected rail transport in this desperately poor country. A statement made in April

2001 by the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) explained, “The devastating floods of late seriously affected the transport infrastructure of more than 50 percent of SADC member states; most seriously in Mozambique, where major rehabilitation and upgrading of the system is of the utmost importance.”

The rail infrastructure was already run down during the 17-year-long civil war, as the South African apartheid regime and the CIA-backed rebel movement, Renamo, attempted to overthrow the Mozambique regime. Some idea of the scale of disruption can be judged by the figure for rail freight traffic, which in 1975, prior to the civil war, was 13 million tons but by 1998 was down to 4.1 million tons. The indiscriminate use of landmines by Renamo left many areas and transport corridors in a parlous state.

A major reason for the ruling elite to play down the dilapidated state of their rail system is because they want to attract investment and carry out privatisation. The South African rail company Spoornet is planning investment in the line to Maputo, which gives important access to the Indian Ocean port. Spoornet is planning to pay \$67.7 million for a concession that allows them to run freight trains through from Johannesburg to Maputo without border stops and to invest \$17.2 million in the Mozambique line.



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