

# Tanzania's worst ever rail crash

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Some 281 people died on June 24 when a passenger train crashed while travelling across Tanzania, from Dar Es Salaam on the coast to Mwanza on the southern shore of Lake Victoria. The train, with 22 coaches and around 1,500 passengers, is reported to have lost power while attempting to climb a long incline. It remained stationary for about 20 minutes at the small station of Ilhuma, about 25 km southeast of the administrative capital, Dodoma. The train then started moving back down the line, but apparently the automatic braking system had failed. Initially it only moved slowly and some people jumped off, but then it began to pick up speed and is reported to have reached 200 kilometres per hour before it crashed into an oncoming freight train.

In the resulting crash there were horrific scenes of carnage. All but one of the 22 coaches left the track and some were crushed completely flat and piled up on each other. Hundreds of survivors were trapped in the wreckage for hours before rescuers could reach the disaster. Rescue workers had to use cranes and welding tools to cut bodies out of the wreckage, some of them so mangled as to be beyond recognition. Many of the bodies, which included children and babies, were laid out at the local sports stadium. Eighty-eight of the dead, not claimed by relatives, were buried at Dodoma in a mass grave because of the lack of a refrigeration system to keep them.

Survivors were taken to local hospitals in Mpwapwa, Dodoma, and other towns. Health Minister Anna Abdallah said, "It's a very bad situation. The hospitals are full to capacity and we have a shortage of doctors." By Wednesday June 26, 371 people were still in hospital and over 600 with minor injuries had been sent home after treatment.

The disaster occurred only a month after 192 people were killed in a train crash in neighbouring Mozambique in almost identical circumstances, when a

train whose brakes had failed ran back down a hill into cement wagons. It brings out the severe lack of investment in railways throughout Africa, with a decaying infrastructure and little mechanical maintenance.

It is the worst accident in the history of the Tanzania Railways Corporation. Ten years ago 100 people were killed in the last major rail accident. Tanzanian newspapers report that over the last decade a total of 1,500 people have died in the country through rail and air crashes, yet the government has taken no action to avert such catastrophes. The local media also criticise the lack of any disaster management strategy to be brought into play in such incidents.

Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa toured the disaster site and clearly wanted to play down the poor state of the rail system. "We have not had anything like it before. All the indications are that it's an accident, an accident we were powerless to prevent." The government has declared two days of mourning and an official inquiry into the crash.

As in much of Africa, the Tanzanian government is attempting to privatise its rail system and Mkapa does not wish to deter potential buyers. Rail workers recently took industrial action against plans to sack 1,800 staff in preparation for privatisation. The government put advertisements in the international press in January, inviting tenders from companies to lease the infrastructure and run passenger and freight services for the next 25 years.

A three-day conference is due to take place in Johannesburg, South Africa in August to discuss investment opportunities for business in the African rail network. Some of the future developments that will be discussed include the Maputo corridor in Mozambique, where the rail crash occurred last month, the Gauging—Dar es Salaam corridor through Tanzania and the establishment of a container trans-shipment facility

in Kidatu, Tanzania. Needless to say, the needs and safety of African workers and peasants will not be part of the agenda.



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