

Spanish train line reopens before investigation into fatal accident begins

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The death toll from Spain's largest-ever train crash on July 3 reached 43, after a passenger died from his injuries early two weeks on. The driver, Joaquin Pardo Tejedor, was among the fatalities. One body has not yet been identified. Around 50 people were injured.

The accident occurred at 1 p.m. in the southeastern Mediterranean city of Valencia. The track where the crash took place was reopened for passengers within days, before any initial investigation could take place. Arguments continue to rage in the regional government of Valencia over the remit of any investigation, the possible cause of the accident, and the length of time needed for an examination to reveal the truth.

Train number 3736 was travelling on Track One between Plaza de Espana and Jesus station in the centre of the city. It has been alleged that the train was travelling at twice the speed limit for the stretch of track where the accident happened. The four-carriage train was close to a junction with another line in a narrow section of tunnel when it derailed and overturned. Passengers had to use their mobile phones as torches, as all the train and tunnel lights failed on impact.

José Ramón García Antón, the official in charge of infrastructure and transport in Valencia, described the crash scene as a nightmarish "mass of steel, destroyed and twisted carriages, broken glass and buckled doors." The data recorder black box was recovered from the crash scene and is still being analysed for information about what went wrong.

Early reports suggest an unexplained human error when the train left Plaza de Espana. Tejedor's shift had started at 5 a.m., and he had already covered the route five times without problems. He was about to begin his sixth and final circuit before the end of the shift. Because of the condition of Tejedor's body, the

autopsy was unable to pronounce on cause of death, so it is not possible to establish whether he experienced any medical problem.

Antón was quick to state that the only cause was the speed of the train as it rounded the corner to enter Jesus station. Track One, he insisted, is safe. This is the same area of Track One where 29 people were injured in a collision involving three underground trains on September 9, 2005.

The newspaper *La Voz* noted that the poor condition of Track One had been frequently criticised by the unions and the users of the Valencia Metro. Two days after the accident, the UGT union said that it could have been prevented if Track One had had the same safety measures as other lines. If these were in place, the accident would not have been so serious, even if the train were travelling at twice the permitted speed, as the modern security systems would cut the speed of the train and bring it to a halt.

Although there is growing concern over the bad state of Track One particularly, the regional authority has come under criticism for underinvestment and a deteriorating underground system. In Tobarra, 150 kilometres from Valencia, 24 people were injured when a train left the tracks in January 2003.

Drivers have made a number of complaints about train and track safety. They have also criticised the way train drivers are rushed through with minimal training. One said of the braking system used on trains on Track One, "The driver can deactivate it with a simple click, when in any subway anywhere in the world the system should be sealed. And still it only works in stations and at switches (points). It's useless if you take a curve at 80 km/h when you're supposed to take it at 40 km/h."

Elsewhere in the world, trains employ a "dead man's handle" system where the handle needs to be held

down for the train to operate. Once released for whatever reason—a medical emergency, for example—the train will immediately grind to a halt. On the trains used in Valencia, the system takes 20-25 seconds to start up. If Tejedor did suffer medical problems, such a system could have saved lives.

A special plenary session of the regional Valencia parliament voted to set up an investigative commission into the accident. However, it announced that the investigation would last for only one month. Its remit would extend back to the 1980s. This was proposed by the right-wing Popular Party (PP), which is the largest party in the regional parliament. The terms for the commission were agreed on thanks to the abstention of the regional opposition parties, the Socialist Workers Party (PSOE), which is in power nationally, and the Stalinist-led Esquerra Unida.

The justification offered for such a short period of official investigation is, according to *El Pais*, “on account of the respect due to the victims.” It has also been stated that conclusions must be reached quickly and remedies applied as soon as possible.

The period the investigation can cover dates back to when the PSOE was in power regionally. This inquiry is sure to be used to reach the right “conclusions” and apply the right “remedies” to suit the political requirements of the PP in the run-up to Valencia’s regional elections in 2007.

While one can say that speed was a factor in the latest incident, the question must be asked as to why appropriate safety systems were not installed onto Track One, even following the 2005 crash. A serious investigation of this question would also have to look at track layout and signalling.

These crucial issues will not be addressed in the inquiry called by the Valencia regional government. That inquiry will hear from municipal leaders along Track One and the heads of the Valencia Regional Railway and their lawyers. With their depositions to be heard in such a short space of time, the inquiry is bound to be a whitewash.



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