

Major train crash causes anger in China

Carol Divjak
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China's worst rail disaster for more than a decade occurred in the early morning of April 28, when an express passenger train travelling from Beijing to the coastal city of Qingdao in Shandong province, jumped tracks and slammed into an oncoming train. The accident claimed the lives of at least 72 people. Another 416 were injured, with many in a critical condition.

The last train crash on a similar scale took place in 1997 when 126 people died in Hunan province. Like the industrial accidents that kill tens of thousands of Chinese workers each year, the causes of the latest tragedy are rooted in the enormous stresses produced by China's sweatshop economy and the government's bureaucratic planning.

The accident happened on a bend, while the express train was travelling at high speed, outside the city of Zibo. Nine carriages of the "T195" train left the rails, toppled over and landed in a ditch. The other "5034" train, on its way from Yantai in Shandong to Xuzhou in eastern Jiangsu province, also derailed after the collision. Local villagers rushed to pull trapped passengers out, using farm tools to smash train windows.

One passenger on the express train told the official Xinhua news agency most people were asleep, but some were standing in the aisle waiting to get off at Zibo station. "I suddenly felt the train, like a rollercoaster, topple to one side and then all the way to the other side. When it finally went off the tracks many people fell on me."

Chinese authorities quickly imposed strict controls over media coverage, blocking foreign journalists from speaking to survivors. Railway officials later revealed that 2,800 passengers were aboard the two trains. The catastrophe happened just on the eve of the May Day long weekend, when millions of people were travelling home to be with families or taking a short break.

The express train was a "Tebie" or "Special" train,

capable of running at high speeds. At the time of the crash, it was clocking 131 kilometres per hour. The Jinan Railway Bureau had issued an order on the same day for trains to reduce speed to 80 kilometres per hour in that area due to the construction of a new rail line running parallel to the existing one. The state-controlled media reported that the current line, built in 1897, was being replaced by a high-speed link for the Olympic Games in August, when Qingdao will host the sailing competition.

Beijing News reported that the instructions to slow down had not been clearly relayed to the train drivers, nor issued to staff at a station that the train passed through shortly before the accident. "After the order was issued no one confirmed that it had been received by the concerned work units," the newspaper reported.

The government has sacked eight Jinan Railway Bureau officials, who are likely to be made scapegoats for broader problems. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime has much at stake in the Beijing Olympics. It is spending tens of billions of dollars, both to impress global investors with the country's business opportunities, and to make the Olympics a platform for national pride and patriotism. Local authorities have been under severe pressure to accomplish their Olympics-related tasks.

According to a British *Mail & Guardian* article on April 30, the head of China's Administration of Work Safety, Wang Jun, was investigating whether the construction work on the new line had destabilised the existing track. At the site of the crash, workers had dug a hole of more than 20 metres to lay the foundations for linking up the new line from Jinan. "Workers on the project, many of whom had assisted in pulling injured and dead passengers from the wreck, refused to comment on whether their construction work contributed to the tragedy," the *Mail & Guardian* reported.

Chinese officials have been anxious to show they can manage any crisis, with the Olympics just three months away. Zibo city spokesman Li Chenggang told the media: “The country has responded very quickly to this. The government has wanted to make sure all the injured are taken care of well and to get the line running as quickly as possible. The Olympics are coming.”

Xinhua’s coverage highlighted the military’s role in the rescue effort. Just 28 hours after the crash, the last remaining carriage was removed and the 1,000 troops assisting the operation began returning to their barracks. More than 120 military vehicles had been used to clear the debris and the No.148 hospital of the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) reportedly treated 85 people and performed surgery on 15.

Much was made of one of four French survivors, who was photographed receiving fresh flowers and being fed by a smiling nurse. Xinhua’s photo caption said the hospital had allocated special staff to care for him and cook the Chinese dishes he liked. All four were later flown, courtesy of the French embassy, to a specialist hospital in Beijing. The PR campaign is designed to impress foreigners with China’s friendliness toward tourists and businessmen.

By contrast, the families of Chinese victims complained of inadequate compensation. Zhao Judong, a Beijing-based software salesman whose 37-year-old wife was killed in the crash, told Reuters by telephone that the families of more than 10 victims had refused the non-negotiable compensation offer of 200,000 yuan (\$US28,620) for each victim. “We do not want to ask for too much, but the officials offered compensation without consultations,” he said. “They won’t discuss the amount with us.”

The primary domestic concern of the Chinese government is that such disasters will trigger social unrest. According to Reuters, Chinese Internet users have called for the dismissal of Railways Minister Liu Zhijun. The latest crash came on top of an accident in Shandong province in January, when 18 workers were killed. A train travelling through the night at high speed slammed into a group of about 100 workers who were carrying out track maintenance near the city of Anqiu.

Severe snowstorms also caused chaos in the railway system earlier this year. Tens of millions of internal migrant workers travelling home for Chinese New Year

were stranded for days because of a massive breakdown. More than 600,000 people were stuck on Guangzhou station alone due to power failures, which were caused by coal shortages for power plants.

Migrant workers form the backbone of the new industrial workforce in the booming coastal provinces. They are also the most frequent passengers on the railway system. CCP officials are well aware that deep social tensions can erupt when disasters or railway chaos occur.

Rapid economic growth has put enormous strain on the rail network. Last year, China’s railways carried 1.36 billion passengers—the world’s second busiest system after India. China will invest \$178.9 billion in railway construction during the current “five-year plan” from 2006-2010. But the primary function of the massive building of infrastructure is to make China an efficient cheap labour platform for global capital, rather than provide for the safety and comfort of passengers.

At the same time, the CCP has listed state-run railway corporations on the Hong Kong share market, following other major state firms, such as the oil giants, that have made huge gains in market capitalisation. The net profit of the Chinese railway firms rose 150 percent for the first quarter of this year. The shareholders will certainly put more pressure on the party bosses-turned CEOs to do whatever is necessary, including cutting back safety measures, in order to make their balance sheets even more attractive to investors.



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