

Italy: Train explosion leads to angry outbursts against Berlusconi

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During the night of Monday, June 29, a train carrying liquid gas exploded in the center of the city of Viareggio on the Tuscany coast of Italy. The explosion devastated a part of the city center, killing 18, including four children.

The explosion happened after a goods train with 14 wagons derailed on its way through the city station. The cause of the accident is thought to be a defective front. Liquid gas spread from one wagon, and three enormous explosions unleashed a wave of pressure and a huge fireball.

Most of the 18 dead are burned beyond recognition. Forty people were injured, most with severe third-degree burns. As of the end of last week, 20 victims were reported still to be in a critical condition.

The fire led to the collapse of two buildings and destroyed the station, together with a number of surrounding houses. Whole streets were devastated. Seven victims were caught by the fire in their sleep and burnt alive.

Around a thousand residents were evacuated. The authorities were fearful that the remaining 13 derailed railroad wagons containing liquid gas could explode. A state of emergency was also declared in the neighboring city of Lucca, and teams worked around the clock to pump the gas out of the remaining wagons.

There were tumultuous scenes in Viareggio on Tuesday evening, when Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi sought to visit the scene of the inferno. Amateur films featured on YouTube show people crying out at the prime minister: “shame,” “fool,” “clear off!” and “bastard.” Police evidently had difficulty containing the crowd.

Anger grew as more details revealed the indifference and carelessness of the authorities. The population is

already feeling the effects of the economic crisis, and this week Berlusconi is set to host the G-8 summit in Italy. In a media stunt aimed at deflecting growing criticism of his government, Berlusconi had deliberately moved the site of the summit to the earthquake-hit town of L’Aquila.

The government has announced two investigations into the disaster in Viareggio. The public prosecutor’s office was activated on Tuesday, and the minister for infrastructure and transport, Altero Matteoli, announced a separate commission of inquiry. The newspaper *Repubblica* quoted Prosecutor General Beniamino Deidda as stating, “The incident did not come about by chance. It was the result of actions, or failures to act, that will be assessed and identified.”

Italian rail trade unions have raised their own reproaches against the National Railways and organised a one-hour national strike on Wednesday demanding better safety precautions. Union representatives said that there had been many previous accidents involving goods trains with broken axles. They accused the railway’s management of underestimating the risks involved.

Savings and cost-cutting measures in the sphere of public services, together with deregulation and privatisation, have led to a decline in the number of safety checks. In Italy and in Europe as a whole, there have been severe cuts made to the goods train network. Hundreds of experienced rail workers have undergone retraining or taken early retirement, and dozens of goods stations have been closed. Rising costs and the reduction of personnel in public transport have created a situation where nobody is prepared to take responsibility for proper safety measures.

The train car involved in the accident belonged to a private transport company called GATX Rail Europe,

an Austrian subsidiary of the American GATX Corporation based in Chicago. The company is registered in Germany. GATX Rail Europe is one of the largest private concerns involved in tank car transportation. Their railroad cars are officially subject to the safety regulations of the European Union.

A representative for the Italian Railways Board declared after the incident that technicians had checked the rail cars before their departure, but according to testimony from Professor Carlo Vaghi of the University of Bocconi, an expert for transport, these checks were often neglected.

There have been a series of similar accidents or near accidents in the past few years. In June alone, there were five separate incidents in Tuscany in which the insufficient maintenance of trains played a role.

On June 22, there was an accident in Vaiano, involving a tank car containing hydrofluoric acid, which could have also led to a disaster. It was only a matter of luck that the region was spared a tragedy. It is only a question of time before a catastrophe similar to that in Viareggio takes place once again.



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