

Train derails in Republic of the Congo, killing at least 60

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Late Monday night a passenger train derailed in the Republic of the Congo, reportedly killing at least 60 people and injuring 450 more.

The derailment occurred late Monday night on the Bienville-run Chemin de Fer Confo Ocean (CFCO) route between the Republic of the Congo's main seaport, Pointe-Noire, and the capital, Brazzaville. The accident occurred roughly 60 km east of Pointe-Noire, near a station at Yango. The railway stated that eight of the train's 10 passenger carriages were thrown, and other reports say several careened into a ravine.

In this area the railway is climbing from the sea-level elevation of Pointe-Noire into the Mayombé Massif coastal mountain range, with deep river gorges. A BBC report from 2007 describes this as the most difficult portion of the line, with frequent bridges and tunnels.

Speaking from a hospital, survivor Lucien Koko told Agence France-Presse: "At a bend the driver went into at full speed, all six carriages where the passengers were derailed. We were thrown by the impact. Many people remain trapped. I can talk because I have a wound on my forearm. Friends who were with me are gravely wounded."

The deputy head of CFCO, Raoul Essou, told AFP: "The toll we are currently giving is temporary," and "the final toll will be very heavy," due to the severity of the derailment, which blocks over 100 meters of track.

Republic of the Congo government spokesman Bienvenue Okiemy told Reuters Africa that "in light of the evidence on the ground, excess speed is the cause of the accident."

Given the reported conditions of the route, raising excess speed would only be beginning of an investigation of the causes of the accident. The condition of the track, braking equipment, locomotive, and crew all could be a factor in the tragedy.

Railways in many African nations are poorly

maintained, subject to violence, and suffer a lack of investment resulting from the domination of powerful international banks. Aged infrastructure, poor maintenance and communications, and lax safety regulations are often contributing factors to deadly rail accidents.

Various reports indicate the line is in poor repair. The CFCO was constructed over rugged hills, jungle, and savannah in 1924-1934 when the Congo was a French colony. To build the route, the French used forced labor at the cost of an estimated 16,000-23,000 lives. The route is still a key connection between the two large cities, carrying both passengers and goods.

The line suffered major damage from the civil war, between June 1997 and December 1999. President Pascal Lissouba took power in 1992, devastating the country with IMF austerity measures, and racked up \$5 billion in debt to the banks by 1999. He was overthrown in October 1997 by former pro-Kremlin military dictator Denis Sassou Nguesso, and received political support by the British government in the ensuing civil war, though Nguesso maintained power.

The effect of this period is described on the CFCO web site, which indicates major repairs like rail and tie replacement occurred only between 1957-1989, leaving infrastructure to deteriorate and be damaged during periods of political instability and civil war.

Since reopening in 2000, the route has only carried half of the freight and a fraction of the passengers that were carried in the 1970s and 1980s, when equipment was newer and the route was in better condition. Nevertheless, passenger traffic has increased steadily after the civil war, with reports of dangerously overcrowded trains.

Security also remains unstable. Armed guards travel on freight trains to protect cargo, and freight car doors have reportedly been welded shut to prevent theft of goods. Since the civil war, there have also been incidents of

sabotage of railway tracks.

The CDOC web site expresses an urgent need for revitalization of the route, include upgrade of equipment, trackage, signaling, and communications. The ways and works portion of the site cites disruption of traffic on the line west of Brazzaville because of broken rails, derailments, flooding, and reduced speeds on poor track.

Another example of worsening conditions is the CFCO web site's list of locomotives in service: in 1986 there were 54 on the route, while in 2008 there are only 23 and just 10 of those are in active service. The number of freight and passenger cars has also fallen by half since the period of unrest.

In response to pleas for funding, President Nguesso declared 2007 the year of revitalization of the rail company. High-ranking government and military officials have traveled to the area, but so far no official public statement has been issued.

Two other horrific railway accidents have occurred on the CFCO in the last two decades. Both were at Mvoungounti, just some 15 kilometers east of the current derailment site. In 2001, shortly after the line was reopened, at least 50 people were killed when two trains collided.

On September 5th, 1991, a freight train of mining goods collided with a passenger train full of passengers from Pointe-Noire at 2:00 a.m. At least 100 died and hundreds more were wounded. Nguesso was also President at the time and faced protests for arriving late to the accident. No cause has yet been published and victims still have not been compensated.

The combination of freight and passenger trains on the same single-track route demands railway signaling to prevent collisions, but CDOC states that the such equipment is dysfunctional or non-existent. Without such basic safety precautions, further accidents are likely, particularly if there is an increase in traffic.



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