India’s latest train crash kills 66 in West Bengal

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21 July 2010

The death toll in India’s fourth major train disaster this year has risen to 66, with more than 150 people injured. The accident occurred at about 2 a.m. on Monday at Sainthia station in the Birbhum district, about 190 kilometres from West Bengal’s capital, Kolkata. A Sealdah-bound Uttar Banga express train rammed into a Vananchal express parked at the station.

Two unreserved general second class coaches and one luggage van of the Vananchal train were thrown off the tracks. One slammed onto a footbridge and another was thrown over the bridge, onto the road along the tracks. Rescue crews had to use gas-cutters to bring out the dead and injured. A rescue worker told the media that they were “only managing to extricate body parts, rather than whole bodies”. Pintoo Singh, a survivor whose arm was broken, told reporters: “All the three bogies were totally wrecked and nobody is alive.”

The Uttar Banga express was meant to stop at Sainthia. Official efforts are being made to blame the driver of the train, who is among the three rail workers killed. Indian Railway Board Chairman Vivek Sahay suggested that human error was the most likely cause, saying the express driver had ignored a stop signal and then failed to reduce speed as he approached the station. “Why was the train travelling so fast? The driver didn’t even touch the brakes or the emergency brakes,” Sahay told reporters.

Retired train drivers interviewed by several Indian newspapers, however, questioned Sahay’s version of events, saying the fact that neither the driver nor his assistant attempted to apply the brakes suggested a signal failure or other technical malfunction.

Sahay himself admitted that the driver was experienced and could not have committed a mistake. According to investigating officials, the service records of the Uttar Banga express driver shows that he was among the top 20 drivers in the Indian Railways.

The disaster is the second within two months, and one of 13 accidents reported so far this year in India, where 9,000 passenger trains run daily, carrying 18 million people. Human error or technical failures have routinely been blamed for what is a systemic failure.

Monday’s accident has led to a cynical political blame game, focused on Railway Minister Mamata Banerjee, who is part of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. West Bengal is holding State Assembly elections next year in which Banerjee’s Trinamool Congress (TMC) is challenging the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM)-led Left Front government. CPM politburo member Sitaram Yechury said: “You have a minister whose attention is elsewhere and the country is paying the price for that.” In effect, he accused Banerjee of being preoccupied with ousting the Left Front state government.

Likewise, Ravi Shankar Prasad, chief spokesman for the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP), the main opposition at the national level, said: “Mamata Banerjee is not taking her ministry seriously. She has even abstained from several cabinet meetings.” Banerjee was previously a partner of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, holding the same railway minister’s post.

For her part, Banerjee sought to deflect responsibility by declaring that she has “suspicions” that the disaster may have been caused by Maoist sabotage, like the May 28 crash near Jhargram in the West Midnapore

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district in West Bengal, which killed 148 people.

A Railway Ministry public relations official said an inquiry would be headed by the railway safety commissioner. Previous inquiries have not led to any slowing in the deaths on India's railways.

Whatever the immediate cause for Monday's crash, it has again highlighted the lack of elementary safety measures. As experts pointed out, the catastrophe could have been averted if an improved anti-collision device had been installed to stop a train automatically if it overshoots a red signal. Former Indian Railway Board chairman IIMS Rana, said: "We don't have such systems. Money is also a constraint."

Rana's reference to "money constraints" underscores the culpability of successive governments, Congress-led and BJP-led alike, which have been indifferent to basic safety and given priority to budgetary and business interests over the lives and wellbeing of passengers and railway employees.

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