

Deadly crash raises question mark over China's bullet trains

John Chan
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A collision between two bullet trains in China last Saturday has dealt a blow to China's ambition to become a world leader in high-speed rail.

The accident occurred at Wenzhou in the eastern province of Zhejiang on Saturday evening. One bullet train—D3115—travelling from Hangzhou city to Fuzhou was stalled by a power outage following a lightning strike. An electronic system designed to alert other trains on the same line to stop or alter their course also lost power and failed to work.

As a result, a second bullet train—D301—careered into the rear of D3115, sending six carriages off the elevated tracks. At least 39 people, including two American citizens, were killed and another 192 were injured.

Although reporters rushed to the scene, no major Chinese newspaper carried a front page story the next day on the crash. An instruction had been issued by Beijing's central propaganda department not to highlight the highly sensitive incident. According to Reuters, the directive ordered the media not to "investigate the cause of the accident" and reminded reporters that "the word from the authorities is all-prevailing."

According to CNN, a user of the Sina microblog—China's equivalent of Twitter—first broke the news. After the leaking of the propaganda department directive, there was an immediate online uproar over the official cover-up. Amid this outcry, the railway ministry was forced to hold a media conference some 24 hours later.

Rail ministry spokesman Wang Yongping insisted: "How can we cover up an accident that the whole world already knew about?" As to safety concerns, he declared: "Chinese technologies are advanced and we are still confident about that."

Anger among ordinary people was reflected in an opinion poll conducted on the Sina Weibo microblog site, which found that 90 percent of users thought the government "did not treat us as humans." One user wrote: "This land is a hotbed for the world's most sprawling bureaucracy and most cold-blooded officials."

Internet users also circulated a 2007 video clip showing the railway ministry's chief engineer proudly declaring on television that China had developed technologies to ensure that bullet trains would never rear-end each other.

The Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* wrote that some 100 family members and friends of the dead victims blocked the road in front of the Wenzhou government building on Monday night after their demand to meet with rail officials from Beijing for an explanation was refused.

Yang Feng lost his wife, who was seven months pregnant, along with her mother, sister and nephew. He asked: "Why is it that more than 48 hours after the accident not a single person from the Ministry of Railways will meet us face to face?" Yang said he had only discovered the bodies of his wife and relatives after begging rescuers to double check the wreckage.

After the railway ministry had declared that there were no more signs of life and started to use bulldozers to clear the line, a small child was rescued 20 hours after the accident. The rush to remove the wreckage with heavy machinery, endangering any survivors, created further anger.

In the face of mounting public anger, Premier Wen Jiabao has ordered a "swift, open and transparent investigation." But as of Wednesday no government official had even met the family members of crash victims, who staged another protest at the Wenzhou train station demanding an official explanation for the disaster and calling on passengers not to

board the “unsafe” trains.

The accident came amid a government drive to rapidly expand the country’s high-speed rail network (defined as running at above 200 kilometres per hour). The rail expansion is a key component of Beijing’s huge stimulus package, implemented to avert a recession following the 2008 global financial crisis. High-speed rail has been promoted as a badge of national pride, testifying to China’s technological prowess, and a potential large export earner.

Beijing is assisting Chinese rail corporations to market bullet train technology globally, from Turkey and Russia to Venezuela. In 2009, Saudi Arabia awarded a \$1.8 billion contract to build a line between Mecca and Medina to a consortium that includes a Chinese corporation. China is planning to build a high-speed network in South East Asia, linking China with Singapore.

The official cover-up was clearly aimed at preventing the Wenzhou crash from damaging these ambitions. Ryota Himeno, an analyst at Mitsubishi UFJ Morgan Stanley Securities, told Bloomberg that “there is probably little chance of China winning a high-speed train order in the US,” including for a line proposed in California.

To placate public anger, the three officials in charge of the line were fired last Sunday. As is the case in China’s deadly coal mining industry, the sacking of a few low-ranking officials does nothing to address the fundamental causes of the Wenzhou accident, which lie in the anarchic capitalist system that puts profit before lives.

Beijing has been engaged in frenetic construction of high-speed railways. Through earlier joint-ventures with French, German and Japanese corporations, Chinese companies quickly acquired the technology and now boast of having surpassed Japan’s bullet train system.

From just 649 kilometres of high-speed track in 2008, China already has over 8,300 kilometres—that is, half of the world’s total track and four times more than in Japan. The line where the accident occurred was only opened in 2009. By 2015, China plans to have 16,000 kilometres of track.

Given the speed of the expansion, engineering experts have repeatedly raised questions about the testing of safety systems. But these concerns have been ignored because the railway network was central to Beijing’s stimulus package.

The railway ministry is now sitting on a mountain of debt

amounting to \$270 billion—five times that of General Motors when it went bankrupt in 2009. Because 70 percent of the rail construction was funded through bonds and loans, the ministry had interest repayments of \$27 billion last year. The debt is projected to rise to \$600 billion by the end of the decade.

With the amounts of money involved, corruption has been rife. In February, the previous railway minister, Liu Zhijun, was dismissed after allegedly taking \$125 million in kickbacks tied to rail construction. Liu was the architect of the high-speed railway program. His successor, Sheng Guangzu, acknowledged in April that safety might have been compromised by corruption. He lowered the top speed from 350 kilometres per hour to 300, while insisting that the decision was not caused by safety concerns, but a desire to make tickets cheaper.

High prices have prevented ordinary workers, especially migrant workers, from using the bullet trains. Just days before the Wenzhou crash, two services from Jinan to Beijing were suspended due to seat occupancies of just 20 percent. At the same time, bullet trains directly compete with domestic air travel, which has also undergone a massive, but anarchic, expansion by local governments. As a result, the airlines and high-speed rail operators alike face difficulties repaying debt and remaining profitable.

Last Saturday’s accident could also impact on land prices, which have skyrocketed as part of the country’s rampant real estate speculation. Land sales in several cities along the new Beijing-Shanghai high-speed line rose sharply in 2009 and 2010. Any delay to the further expansion of high-speed rail could trigger falls in property prices.

Given the significant economic interests at stake, no doubt every effort will be made to sweep the serious safety issues raised by the railway tragedy under the carpet in order to facilitate the continued extension of high-speed rail, making further terrible accidents inevitable.



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