

Italy bus crash claims 39 lives

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A coach crash on Sunday night on a stretch of road near Monteforte Irpino, east of Naples, has claimed 39 lives. A dozen were injured, including several with serious injuries. Five children were amongst the injured.

The bus slammed into a guardrail and travelled down the rail for at least 100 meters before the protective railing gave way and the bus plummeted off a viaduct. It then plunged 100 feet, with the force of the impact from the fall ripping the bus apart.

Before crashing into the railing, the bus had struck six cars traveling on the highway. Flashing signs had warned of slowed traffic ahead along the stretch of highway where the crash took place.

The bus was reportedly carrying around 50 people from working class families in the area, including many children returning from a weekend excursion to the local Telesse thermal baths and the pilgrimage destination of Pietralcina.

Rescue crews worked overnight to extract survivors and victims from the wreckage.

The Naples crash is the second deadly transport accident in Europe over the last week. A rail disaster in Spain last Wednesday killed 78 passengers when a high-speed train derailed in Santiago de Compostela on Wednesday.

Initial reports suggested that mechanical failure, such as a blown tire or brake failure, had occurred. Police investigators reported that there were no skid marks indicating that the driver had braked. Parts of the transmission of the bus were found more than a kilometer away from the site of the accident, and police reported that the bus was traveling "at high speed and with the front door open or missing".

Eyewitnesses reported that the bus had been travelling at a "normal" speed on the downhill stretch of the highway when it suddenly veered and started hitting cars. Some witnesses said they heard a noise as

if the bus had blown a tire.

Police believe that the driver tried to reduce his speed by driving along the guardrail.

The bus reportedly passed its annual inspection in March.

Rescue workers are still trying to recover the vehicle's black box with a record of its speed, distance travelled and rest time. The driver died in Sunday's crash, and investigators said that they must first examine the coach's black box to get a clear picture of what took place.

Local media said the stretch of road where the bus crashed had been the scene of repeated accidents. Ten years ago, an accident in the same area claimed the lives of six victims and injured 11 others.

It remains unclear to what extent the accident was caused by a coach defect, poor road conditions, possible driver error, or a combination of all of these.

A genuine investigation of the crash would also include a wider examination of the impact of deep spending cutbacks and prolonged economic crisis on infrastructure and safety precautions, however.

In its Monday edition, the daily *La Repubblica* interviewed the ASAPS (Association of supporters and friends of Highway Police) traffic organization, which stated that bus accidents should be examined more closely.

La Repubblica wrote: "The ASAPS believes that in this type of accidents, in most cases driving times in excess of the prescribed 9 hours per day or the skipping of rest periods mandated by Article 174 of the Security Code play an important role. In the association's opinion, the long economic crisis also has led to falsifications in the recording of driving time, rest time, and violation of speed limits that are widely documented."

Italy has implemented a cuts program dictated by the European Union and the IMF which have had severe

consequences for the country's infrastructure spending.

In 2011, the EU revoked \$471 million in grants made to Italy for infrastructure improvements. The original grants were given to assist in highway construction, but they were revoked amid claims by the EU that it had uncovered "widespread irregularities" in local Italian government's granting of contracts.

The funds that Italy has to repay to the EU comes on top of a fresh round of budget cuts against the background of an economy that is expected to shrink by nearly 2 percent. The country's GDP has already dropped by 7 percent since 2007.

Despite having carried out a succession of austerity measures in the past two years, the Italian government is under constant pressure to do more. In a recent report, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) called upon the government to enforce labor market reforms and make more drastic budget cuts.



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