

Tragic bus accident in France claims 43 lives

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In France yesterday morning at 7:30, a bus carrying 49 old-age pensioners crashed into a jackknifed logging truck, killing 43 people. This terrible drama took place near Bordeaux. It is the worst road accident in France for the last 30 years.

The details are still unclear and somewhat contradictory, but the bus was taking a turn on a thin and winding regional road when the bus driver saw the truck that had jackknifed on the bend and was on the wrong side of the road. The road was not wide enough to avoid the truck and the bus crashed into it. The logging truck was not carrying any wood; only the driver and his three-year-old son were on board. They both died.

The accident took place near the village of Puisseguin in the Gironde area of Aquitaine, about 35 miles from Bordeaux. The pensioners were members of a senior citizens club at Petit-Palais-Cornemps and were traveling for a day's outing to Arzacq-Arraziguet in the Pyrénées-Atlantiques region, where they would visit the House of Bayonne Ham. The accident occurred only five miles from their starting point.

Most of the passengers came from Petit-Palais-Cornemps, which has a population of less than 700 people. Virtually all the families of this village have lost a member of their family.

Immediately after the accident, the driver opened the door to let people out. A few people got out, but both the cabin of the truck and the bus went up in flames very quickly. The driver went back in and rescued a few more people, helped by a passenger. A driver of a car following the bus also helped people to get out by breaking the windows of the bus. They were quickly beaten back by the flames, however. In all, only 8 of 49 passengers were saved.

The speed with which the flames engulfed the vehicles and claimed the lives of dozens of people raises troubling questions as to the safety of the

vehicles involved. It remains to be determined exactly how the fire broke out and spread.

Since the front of the bus hit the side of the jackknifed cabin of the truck, a number of experts have raised the hypothesis that the truck would have its reservoir of hydraulic oil and the bus would have had its gasoline tank positioned at the point of impact. The possibility of one or both tanks rupturing may explain the rapid progress of the fire.

In a press conference held by the Gendarmes, the district attorney and DNA analysts said that the most urgent task of the investigators was to identify the bodies of the victims so that their families could prepare the funerals. The DNA analysts explained that the bodies were burned so badly in the fire that it would take up to three or four weeks to complete this task.

The accident makes clear that the safety of forms of transport such as buses needs to come under very close examination. In fact, every few years there have been similar incidents in France, though with fewer victims than the current tragedy.

These small roads are maintained by regional and local governments. President François Hollande and his Socialist Party (PS) government have been pursuing austerity policies and have been pushing many expenses onto regional and local government, creating a financial crisis for these bodies. The same has been done for France's increasingly rickety regional train network, where the regional councils alone have to finance this form of transport.

Furthermore, Emmanuel Macron, the economy minister of Hollande's government, sponsored a new law named after him that liberalized many aspects of the economy. One of the aims of this legislation was to promote cheap bus travel so as to avoid maintaining many regional train routes.

Bus travel costs are 25 to 50 percent of the cost of regional trains. In 2014 only 110,000 people traveled

by bus. In the first month after the Macron Law went into effect in 2015 there were 250,000 passengers.

Noël Mamère, a Green parliamentary deputy of the Gironde area, commented: “For those who know the place where the accident happened, as I do, it’s an extremely dangerous bend which is considered very accident-prone....That should make us question the political choices that are made in terms of infrastructures.”



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