French state quashes discussion of safety issues after 43 die in bus crash

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Since the terrible bus accident last week claimed 43 lives, the Socialist Party (PS) government has been at pains to downplay connections between the accident and its liberalisation agenda, which includes ever-heavier reliance on buses for rural mass transit.

Prime Minister Manuel Valls, Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve and Junior Minister for Transport Alain Vidalies all arrived in Puisseguin, the village in the Gironde area where the accident took place, last Friday morning only hours after the accident happened.

The bus had been carrying a group of pensioners from a Seniors' Club in Petit-Palais-Cornemps, a village only five miles away from the site of the accident. The ministers did not visit Petit-Palais-Cornemps; Valls claimed that this was out of respect for families who had lost relatives in the crash.

The accident took place on a narrow and winding secondary road on a bend. As the bus came around the bend, the driver saw a logging truck that had jackknifed onto the wrong side of the road. He tried to avoid the truck, but the road was not wide enough, so he hit the jackknifed side of the truck's cabin.

According to witness reports, it was not this small impact that took the lives of the passengers, but a fire that started only seconds after the impact.

Colonel Patrick Touron, who heads the Institute of Criminal Research of the National Gendarmerie (IRCGN), explained: "Apparently, in the impact between the truck and the bus, a metal rod pierced the back of the truck's cab and punctured the truck's additional, pressurised tank of diesel."

According to Touron, a "mist of diesel oil" spraying from this tank is what caused the sudden, catastrophic eruption of flames that consumed the bus and killed dozens of people. Contact with a "hot surface like an exhaust, mechanical object or other source of energy would have broken the bus's windshield, which would have collapsed, initiating the fire in the bus."

President François Hollande, Prime Minister Valls and other members of the government and the PS were present at a ceremony for the victims in Petit-Palais-Cornemps this Tuesday.

However, in the run-up to the ceremony, the reason for the government's nervousness has been made clear. Hollande, Valls and the government were afraid that the accident would be cited to raise questions as to the viability of their unpopular liberalisation measures.

In an interview with RMC radio, Noël Mamère, parliamentary deputy of the Greens for the Gironde area, said: "The question which emerges, unfortunately in these tragic circumstances, is the choices made by the government and [Economy Minister Emmanuel] Macron to liberalise the bus system to the detriment of trains and secondary lines which are 'safer' and which have been abandoned."

Mamère in other interviews also criticised similar choices made for the road infrastructure, where the government cut spending on maintenance of secondary roads. The liberalisation of the buses was carried out in the Macron Law, named after the economy minister.

A PS deputy, Gérard Filoche, also briefly pointed out that the bus accident put Macron's Law into question.

The interventions of Mamère and Filoche produced a cascade of criticisms from the PS. Claude Bartolone, the president of the National Assembly, commented: "I hope that Noël Mamère woke up badly this morning; there will be the ceremony that will allow neighbors, friends and family to gather around in memory of the dead and try to begin to mourn after the catastrophe."

"If there is a plane crash, would we ban all flights? Here we have a disaster that was very difficult to predict.... Making these kind of remarks, it's

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insufferable," he added. "After such remarks, ultimately the only thing we can do is ask for an apology, especially towards the families. Trying to make the connection between this terrible accident and a government decision, such things are not done."

Jean-Louis Gagnaire, the PS deputy of the Loire area, tweeted: "Does Filoche still have a place in the Socialist Party after his indecent exploitation of the Puisseguin accident against Emmanuel Macron?"

Gagnaire addressed a request to PS First Secretary Jean-Christophe Cambadelis: "Expel him from the PS! In these circumstances, I have no desire to cohabit with this despicable individual."

The PS announced it had "banned" Mamère from coming to the memorial ceremony for the victims in a tweet by the PS deputy for the Gironde area, Florent Boudié.

Unsurprisingly, given their longstanding support for the PS and the government, neither Mamère nor Filoche has responded to these attacks. Mamère stayed away from the memorial ceremony in Petit-Palais-Cornemps.

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