

Head-on train collision near Bari, Italy kills at least 25

Our reporter
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At least 25 people were killed and 50 wounded in a horrific head-on collision between two passenger trains Tuesday morning. The two trains were on the same track located between the towns of Andria and Corato in the Puglia region of southern Italy.

Three of the lead cars of the two trains were completely destroyed by the crash, and passengers and debris were scattered in olive tree orchards near the track. Corato Mayor Massimo Mazzilli said looking at the scale of the devastation, “One would think it was an airplane accident.”

It is feared that the death toll may rise further in the coming days as severely wounded passengers succumb to their injuries.

“It was a terrifying scene, like a hallucination,” one rescue worker told *La Repubblica*. “I saw dead people, others who were asking for help and others who were crying, it was the most terrible sight in my life.”

“The force of the impact means that many bodies are unrecognizable,” added Red Cross nurses at the scene, “so relatives will have to base themselves on the victims' clothes.”

Rescuers struggled to pry open the remaining cars and set up a field hospital in order to tend to grievously wounded passengers in the remote rural area while working in scorching 40°C (104°F) heat. A small child miraculously found in one of the lead cars was flown by helicopter to a nearby hospital.

“We are working with dozens of rescue teams to open up the carriages,” said fire service spokesman Luca Cari. “The rescue operation is complicated because this happened in the middle of the countryside.”

Local hospitals recalled all doctors and nurses who had gone on vacation and canceled all non-emergency operations in order to concentrate on the influx of the wounded. They also issued an appeal for blood

donations and blood banks reported long lines of local residents responding to the appeal.

In Milan, Prime Minister Matteo Renzi said there would be a thorough investigation of the crash. “We will not stop until full light has been shed on this,” he told reporters. “There is an absolute need to understand who is responsible and to shed total light” on what happened, Renzi said.

Sergio Mattarella, the president of the Italian Republic, denounced an “intolerable accident” and demanded that rail companies determined “with precision what is responsible.”

The causes of the accident remain unclear, however, and investigators are searching for the train’s black boxes to determine what the train drivers did in the minutes leading up to the crash. They will reportedly be seeking to establish the speeds at which the trains were traveling—it is expected that both could have been traveling at over 100 km per hour—and whether the drivers attempted to brake.

Work was reportedly in progress to add another track to the line in the area, so that such a head-on collision would be impossible. A rail official said, “These were very modern trains, one built in 2005 and another in 2009, both with very effective brakes. The misfortune was that the crash took place at a curve, and neither driver may have had the time to hit the brakes.”

Stefania Gnesi, an information technology staff researcher at the National Research Council, said in a telephone interview with the *New York Times* that there was no automatic brake system in use on the stretch of track where the crash occurred. “Ms. Gnesi said that the trains were probably operating on instructions from dispatchers. “It’s probable that there was some human error in this chain, in a section of train track that has no automatic control or automatic brake system,” she said.

Automatic systems are used on most of Italy's railway lines, the *Times* noted, "but have not yet been installed in some areas, especially in southern Italy, which is less developed and less prosperous than the north."

Even before thoroughly investigating the accident, local prosecutors and police suggested a signal controller might have sent both trains onto the single track during morning rush hour. "This is currently the hypothesis we are working with," Corato police told *France Info*.

The line is managed by a private firm, Ferrotramviaria, and is taken by thousands of people daily. "This line is taken mainly by youth, students at Bari University, it makes a connection between the small towns and the university," journalist Lucia Oliveri told RAI.

This terrible event is the deadliest accident involving passenger trains in Italy since April 1978, when two trains collided near a ravine close to Murazze Vado. Forty-two passengers were killed when some of the carriages plunged into the ravine.

There have been a growing series of accidents in the 21st century, however, with the 2002 derailing in Rometta Messina, killing eight, and a head-on collision between a passenger and a freight train near Crevalcore, which killed 17 in 2005.

The worst recent accident occurred when a freight train carrying liquefied gas derailed in Viareggio and exploded, killing 30.

Throughout the world, the increasing privatization of public rail systems and government austerity measures have led to job cuts and delay in necessary infrastructure upgrades and maintenance undermining the safety of both rail workers and the traveling public. Prime Minister Renzi is proposing another €5 billion in spending cuts this year in order to reduce corporate taxes.



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