

Fatal crash near Palm Springs, California leaves 13 dead, 31 injured

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At least 13 people were killed and 31 injured in a deadly crash on Interstate 10 in southern California early Sunday morning, when a tour bus slammed into the rear of a semi-truck at Indian Canyon in the Desert Hot Springs area near Palm Springs. It is one of the deadliest accidents of its kind in California history.

The USA Holiday tour bus, which carried 43 passengers, was headed back to Los Angeles from a casino at Salton Sea, near Thermal, California. The bus was owned and operated by Teodulo Elias Vides, one of the victims. He operated a bus charter service specialized in casino trips which would leave from LA's Koreatown in the evening and return in the early hours the following morning.

Investigators are probing the causes of the accident, which took place at about 5a.m., though they have speculated the driver may have fallen asleep or suffered a heart attack. Drug and alcohol use have not been ruled out. It is also unclear whether the driver was speeding or whether the bus braked at all, as no skid marks were found. The bus was 20 years old and may not have been equipped with a data recorder, making the investigation more difficult.

Several passengers were asleep at the time of the accident. Those who survived gave emotional testimony about the impact, which crushed the front end of the bus.

"The truck was moving very slowly," Miguel Martinez said. "Our driver slammed on the brakes, then the bus skidded for several yards before crashing into the truck. Seconds later, people in the bus were screaming for help. The front six rows, where 12 people had been sitting, were squashed together. Everyone, dead and alive, was covered with blood. The right side of one man's face was peeled back."

In the immediate aftermath of the crash, the driver of

the truck, Bruce Guilford, said the bus "hit me from behind and I just blacked out for a minute and when I gained my consciousness, I undid my seatbelt and looked around." He said his thoughts then turned to those in the bus: "You got to think about others. I'm going to be alright. I want to get them safe."

The victims were between 52 and 72 years old. Several were retirees.

Maggie Monterroso had been using the bus service for 10 years. She remembered Vides, the bus owner, affectionately. "He was always friendly, always jovial, he cared a lot about us," she said.

As is often the case in such accidents, there is a rush to find an individual culprit, in this case Vides. Investigators have already concluded that two of the bus tires did not meet regulation.

Vides' was a small-time operation, with only one bus. Last year he alone drove more than 68,000 miles. According to official records, his company was sued twice for negligence, although it appears from public records that he was not the one driving on those occasions. In one of those accidents his bus hit a sedan, killing its driver and two passengers.

There were also citations issued against Vides for speeding as well as for operating with an expired permit and a suspended license.

Though the cause of the accident is not yet known, financial pressures typically weigh heavily on "owner-operators" such as Vides, just as they do employees of larger transport firms. Bus and truck drivers are often compelled to operate vehicles for long periods of time, increasing the chances of accidents.

Excessively long hours have been encouraged by the deregulation of the trucking and bus transport industries. The last few decades have seen both Democratic and Republican administrations dismantle

safety regulations that had been established in an earlier period, and which placed limits on the operational latitude of companies, curtailing their ability to extract profit by keeping drivers on the road longer.

The Nixon administration kicked off a series of deregulation initiatives across the transportation industry, which later, under the Ford and Carter administrations, led to the Railroad Revitalization and Regulatory Reform Act (1976), the Airline Deregulation Act (1978), the Staggers Rail Act (1980) and the Motor Carrier Act of 1980.

Today, a bus can transport passengers without seat belt requirements or emergency lighting, to point to just two safety measures absent from the industry. Only very recently, following a deadly crash in northern California in 2014, Gov. Jerry Brown signed a law that would require buses to be equipped with emergency lighting that would automatically illuminate after a collision—but only for buses manufactured *after* 2020 and that carry more than 39 people.

Sunday's crash is under investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board. One of its ostensible spheres of examination is the role of poor road conditions and the absence of street lighting in accidents—both components of a decaying system of infrastructure that suffers from decades of budget cuts and privatization.

According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, it would take an investment of \$3.6 trillion to raise the US infrastructure to a B rating by 2020, from its current D rating. Roads, as well as schools, transit, aviation and dams, received no more than a D in the organization's last report.



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