

# Train derailment kills 48 in Taiwan

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A train derailment in Taiwan last Friday has left 48 people dead and 198 more injured. The number of fatalities could rise as victims succumb to their injuries and others are identified.

Authorities are currently attributing the cause of the derailment to an improperly parked truck at a construction site that slid down a hill and stopped on the tracks before colliding with the train.

The accident is the worst derailment in Taiwan in four decades. The eight-carriage train called the Taroko Express was carrying 496 people when the crash occurred at 9:28 in the morning. Of that number, 372 were seated passengers, 120 were standing and four were train staff.

People were traveling for the beginning of the Qingming holiday weekend. Qingming, or Tomb-sweeping Day, is an occasion when many in Taiwan and throughout China travel to clean the graves of ancestors and spend time with family members.

The accident took place near the city of Hualien on the east coast of Taiwan. The train model is one of the fastest in Taiwan and typically travels at a top speed of 130 kilometers per hour. The train was emerging from a tunnel when it struck the construction vehicle. Several of the carriages and their passengers were stuck inside the tunnel and unable to escape.

A passenger posted a video on social media describing how the accident occurred. “Our train crashed into this truck,” he stated, showing the wreckage. “The truck rolled down, and now the whole train is twisted.”

Rescuers did not begin to arrive until shortly after 11 a.m. As the train lost power and was stuck inside the tunnel, many passengers were forced to wait in the dark train for over an hour before rescuers were able to guide them out through the carriages. Others were able to smash windows and escape the wreckage by crawling along the top of the train. While all survivors were freed from the train by Friday afternoon, recovery work continued throughout the weekend and it will likely take a week before the entire site is cleared.

Lin Chi-feng, one of the first responders, told Taiwan’s

Central News Agency (CNA) that the scene “was a living hell. Chairs were mangled, objects were scattered all over the floor, and blood was everywhere.”

Among those killed were the train’s driver, Yuan Chun-hsiu, who was only 33, and his assistant. Yuan had activated the emergency brake on the train shortly before it struck the construction vehicle, according to the train’s conductor.

Lee Yi-hsiang, the manager of the construction site where the vehicle was located, was arrested on suspicion of negligence for failing to ensure an emergency brake on the truck was applied properly. He was initially released on bail on Saturday. However, that decision was reversed on Sunday following an appeal by prosecutors and he has been ordered detained for two months.

As is the case whenever such preventable disasters occur, government officials have been quick to offer phony words of condolences to cover up the fact that little to nothing will be done to address relevant safety issues. Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen visited survivors in hospital on Saturday, and stated, “This heartbreaking accident caused many injuries and deaths. I came to Hualien today to visit the injured and express my condolences to the deceased passengers’ families. We will surely help them in the aftermath.”

Transportation Minister Lin Chia-lung admitted on Friday that not enough had been done to ensure railway safety following the last major train accident in 2018, saying “clearly the speed and results of the reforms were not enough.” The 2018 derailment took place in Yilan in the northeast, killing 18 people and injuring 187. Prior to that, the largest train accident was in 1981 when 31 people were killed. Lin stated in a Facebook post that he would resign as soon as the initial rescue work ended.

The accident raises a number of questions, including why there was no proper barrier between the construction site and the railroad tracks and why the Taiwan Railways Administration (TRA), which operated the train, oversold so many standing tickets to passengers. As is too often the case, safety is often sacrificed on worksites in order to

speed up construction and cut costs. Passenger safety is also sacrificed in order to maximize profits.

Whatever the individual role of the construction site manager may be, it is clear that the Taiwanese authorities will use him or some other scapegoat in an attempt to stop people from drawing the conclusion that these types of accidents are caused by a broader, profit-driven disregard for safety.

Friday's derailment also follows an accident in February when two maintenance workers were struck and killed by a train while a third was injured in eastern Taitung County.

Wei Yu-ling, the secretary-general of the Taiwan Labor Railway Union (TLRU), stated that the recent accidents "exposed the inner problems of the Taiwan Railways Administration from top to bottom." Despite the record of negligence, Wei said she expected the government to conduct a thorough investigation, essentially telling workers to place their faith in the very authorities who have created the conditions for the recent accidents.

Wei's comments demonstrate that the union has no intention of carrying out a fight for workers' safety.

The TLRU has sold-out its membership in the past, most recently when 200 station workers with the Yilan County branch pledged not to work over the April 2 to 5 holiday weekend. The branch has a total membership of 1,200. Workers stated they would strike to protest a new TRA work scheme that would cut their monthly overtime pay by approximately \$NT11,000 (\$US392).

The union opposed the plans for a stoppage, declaring that it was not "authorised." A grovelling TLRU statement declared that "Disputes between management and workers should be resolved with wisdom and unity, but the Tomb Sweeping Day holiday is not the time to settle them."



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