

Three weeks since Odisha train disaster: Indian authorities desperate to cover up their responsibility for the tragedy

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While horrific scenes of one of India's worst train accidents on June 2 are still haunting millions of people, the country's ruling elite, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his government, is continuing its efforts to find a scapegoat for the disaster.

Nearly 300 passengers were killed and more than 1,200 injured, many seriously, when three trains collided during the night on June 2. The incident occurred at the Bahanaga Bazar railway station in the Balasore district of the eastern Indian state of Odisha.

According to Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw, the horrific accident was caused by "a change in the electronic interlocking" system used to avoid collisions.

Instead of allocating billions of rupees to develop and upgrade rail and necessary safety infrastructure, and repair serious safety faults caused by decades of neglect and cost-cutting by successive governments, the Modi administration and state authorities are trying to cover up their own responsibility.

Modi and his railway minister, worried that the train disaster is trashing the government's global image and could impact on their fortunes in next year's general elections, are now involved in a desperate damage-control exercise.

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), which comes under Modi's central government and is now in charge of investigating the accident, searched the home of Railway Signal Junior Engineer Amir Khan on June 21.

According to the *Indian Express*, Khan's rented home at Soro in Balasore district has been sealed. He is reportedly part of the signalling wing at Soro, which is

"responsible for installation, maintenance and repair of the signalling system" and the Bahanaga Bazar station where the accident occurred.

The *Indian Express* reported that CBI officials took Khan to "an undisclosed location for further interrogation" after the search. No other details were provided.

An unnamed railway official told the media on June 10 that the CBI also sealed Bahanaga Bazar railway station after seizing its logbook, relay panel and equipment. Trains could no longer stop at the station.

Senior railway officials have claimed that the disaster was caused by "deliberate interference" with the electronic interlocking system while Modi has declared "Whoever made the mistake, strong action will be taken."

Hindu fanatics and right-wing pro-Modi elements on social media have begun blaming Muslims for the tragedy. *India Today* cited one such communalist social media post which falsely claimed that the Bahanaga Bazar station master was a Muslim who had fled after the crash.

In a June 11 interview with *NewsClick*, former Indian Railways Chief Engineer Alok Kuma Verma questioned CBI's involvement in the investigation, declaring that it had "no competence" to conduct the inquiry.

"This is something the minister concerned, and the government want. Their [enquiry] can only be seen as a side act because the government has not revealed why they believed there was sabotage. The CRS (Commission of Railway Safety) must complete its enquiry report, which should be put before the public

and Parliament,” Verma said.

Hundreds of badly disfigured bodies remain unclaimed in mortuaries and school buildings in Odisha. Meanwhile, five of the 1,200 passengers injured in the disaster have since died in hospital.

Disputes have also emerged over the real number of deaths. The *New York Times*, for example, reported: “The three crushed general coaches of the Coromandel Express held about 300 people in all, according to a senior Indian official. That figure matches the cars’ official capacity; accounts from inside the train indicate that the number could be significantly higher. Railway officials have said that only two of the dead identified so far came from the reserved coaches.”

That hundreds of bodies remain unclaimed highlights the fact that most of the victims were impoverished workers who could only afford to buy the unreserved seats. The more expensive reserved tickets are only issued after the passenger’s details are recorded.

The *Times* also noted the inadequate expansion of India’s rail capacity: “While the passenger load in this country of 1.4 billion people has increased more than threefold over the past 50 years, the railway network’s capacity, in terms of mileage of track, has expanded only about 40 percent.”

During his *NewsClick* interview, former chief engineer Verma said: “We do not have fast trains. In fact, we have amongst the slowest trains in the world, yet we have catastrophic accidents. Maintenance work is being compromised. Our station officers and other staffers are overworked. Overcrowding in our general and sleeper compartments is another major problem, and this increases fatalities.”

Verma bluntly criticised the Modi government’s transport policies: “We are building expensive expressways at a phenomenal rate, and the airlines and air traffic are growing at 10 percent too, but the most climate and environment-friendly means of transport, the railways, have been neglected, which is very tragic. It is because of misplaced priorities.”

The “priorities” of the Modi government and the Indian bourgeoisie are driven by profit, not the preservation of human life, hence their total indifference to the mass deaths in Odisha and the millions killed in India from climate disasters and the deadly coronavirus pandemic.

Working in close collaboration with the US

government and its accelerating preparations for war against China, the Modi government is preoccupied with boosting its military spending to pursue New Delhi’s reactionary geopolitical interests in the region. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, India remained the world’s largest arms importer for the five-year period between 2018–22. This money should be used to protect the health and lives of the working class and the peasant masses, not for militarism, war and death.



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