

International

Official links deadly Indian train crash to signal system

Families scoured hospitals and morgues for missing relatives and friends

BALASORE: The cause of India's deadliest train disaster in decades was linked to the signal system, the railway minister said Sunday, as families scoured hospitals and morgues for missing relatives and deaths were expected to top 288.

Mounds of debris were piled high at the site of Friday night's crash near Balasore, in the eastern state of Odisha, as workers repairing the tracks cleared the smashed carriages and blood-stained wreckage where hundreds were also injured. Hospitals have been overwhelmed by the number of casualties.

"We have identified the cause of the accident and the people responsible for it," India's Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnav told news agency ANI. He said it was "not appropriate" to give details before a final investigation report.

There was confusion about the exact sequence of events but reports cited railway officials saying a signaling error had sent the Coromandal Express running south from Kolkata to Chennai onto a side track.

It slammed into a freight train and the wreckage derailed an express running north from India's tech hub Bengaluru to Kolkata that was also passing the site. Sudhanshu Sarangi, director general of Odisha Fire Services, said the death toll stood at 288 but was expected to rise further, potentially approaching 380. Odisha's chief secretary Pradeep Jena confirmed that about 900 injured people had been hospitalized.

'Someone should be punished'

Vaishnav said the "change that occurred during electronic interlocking, the accident happened due to that", referring to a technical term for a complex signal system designed to stop trains colliding by arranging their movement on the tracks.

"Whoever did it, and how it happened, will be found out after proper investigation," he said. Local media have quoted a preliminary investigation report, with the Times of India reporting on Sunday that "human error in signaling may have caused the collision between three trains".

Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the crash site and injured passengers in hospital on Saturday and said "no one responsible" would be spared. "I pray that we get out of this sad moment as soon as possible," he told state broadcaster Doordarshan.

The rescue effort was declared over on Saturday evening after emergency personnel had combed the mangled wreckage for survivors and laid scores of bodies beside the tracks. A high school close to the crash site was turned into a makeshift morgue, but officials said many of the bodies were so disfigured that several distraught families could only identify their loved ones by pieces of jewellery.

"There were bodies with only a torso, an entirely burnt face, disfigured skull and no other visible identity markers left," said Ranajit Nayak, the police officer in charge of releasing the bodies at the school.

In sweltering heat, unidentified bodies were being transferred to bigger centres and officials suggested some would only be identified by DNA testing. Mohammad Abid, 35, said his 18-year-old son had somehow survived the crash without injuries but he was looking for his cousin, who had been travelling with him. "I want to know how two trains were allowed on the same track... someone should be punished for this," Abid said.

Search for loved ones

Grief-stricken Vishwanath Sahni, 47, was searching for his 26-year-old son Manoj Kumar, who had been travelling to Chennai for work in the textile industry. He was waiting at a morgue after touring every hospital that he could. "I don't know if I'll find my son," he said. Beside him waited his friend Mahender Yadav, 60, whose two sons travelling with Kumar were recovering in hospital. "One of them has serious injuries but I know that they are in a hospital and doctors will do their best," Yadav said. "I just wanted to be with Sahni and hope that he finds his son."

Authorities said every hospital between the crash site and the state capital Bhubaneswar, around 200 kilometres



BALASORE: Victims' family members look at photographs to identify bodies at a business park used as temporary morgue for the dead recovered from the carriage wreckage of a three-train collision near Balasore, in India's eastern state of Odisha. — AFP

(125 miles) away, had received victims. India has one of the world's largest rail networks and has seen several disasters over the years, the worst of them in 1981 when a train derailed while crossing a bridge in Bihar and plunged into the river below, killing between 800 and 1,000 people.

Friday's crash ranks as its third worst and the deadliest since 1995, when two express trains collided in Firozabad,

near Agra, killing more than 300 people. The disaster comes despite new investments and upgrades in technology that have significantly improved railway safety in recent years.

Condolences have poured in from around the world, including from Pope Francis, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and French President Emmanuel Macron. — AFP

HK police detain eight on Tiananmen anniversary

HONG KONG: Hong Kong police detained a prominent pro-democracy activist and at least seven others on Sunday, the 34th anniversary of the bloody Tiananmen Square crackdown in China. For years, Hong Kongers would converge on the city's Victoria Park and its surrounding neighborhood to commemorate the events of June 4, 1989 — taking part in candlelight vigils.

This weekend, scores of police were deployed in the area, stopping people to search their belongings and question them. By late afternoon, AFP reporters witnessed at least eight people taken away by police in vans — including Alexandra Wong, a well-known pro-democracy activist better known as "Grandma Wong".

The 67-year-old was carrying flowers as police surrounded her and escorted her away. Another woman who shouted "Raise candles! Mourn 64!" — a shorthand for the sensitive date — was also detained, along with a young man dressed in black carrying a book.

The book title was "35th of May", a likely reference to June 4. One woman who was briefly questioned, searched and then released, shrugged and told AFP: "Everyone knows what day is today." Police arrested four people on Saturday for "seditious" acts and "disorderly conduct", and another four were detained on suspicion of breaching the peace. By late afternoon Sunday, police had set up a tent in the middle of the busy shopping district where they questioned people out of direct sight of the public.

Forbidden commemoration

Discussion of the Tiananmen crackdown is highly sensitive for China's communist leadership and commemoration is forbidden on the mainland. The government sent troops and tanks to Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989 to break up peaceful protests, brutally crushing a weeks-long wave of demonstrations calling for political change. Hundreds — by some estimates, more than 1,000 — were killed. For decades, Hong Kong was the only Chinese city with a large-scale commemoration — a key index of the liberties and political pluralism afforded by its semi-autonomous status.

But the annual vigil at Victoria Park has been banned since 2020, when Beijing imposed a sweeping national security law to quell dissent after massive, and at times violent, pro-democracy protests. The park was transformed for a "hometown carnival fair" organized by pro-Beijing groups this weekend to celebrate the up-



HONG KONG: League of Social Democrats leader Chan Po Ying (C) argues with police officers before being taken away in the Causeway Bay shopping district of Hong Kong on June 4, 2023, close to the venue where Hong Kong people traditionally gather annually to mourn the victims of China's Tiananmen Square crackdown in 1989. — AFP

coming 26th anniversary of Hong Kong's handover from Britain to China. Wong, a 53-year-old fairgoer, said the Tiananmen vigil was an event of the past. "Hong Kong is a different place now."

Erase memories

Beijing has gone to exhaustive lengths to erase the 1989 event from public memory in the mainland. All mention of the crackdown is scrubbed from China's internet. On Sunday, officers were posted around Tiananmen Square, at times stopping cyclists. Over the weekend, sites of more recent protests — a bridge in Beijing where a "freedom" banner was unfurled, and Wulumuqi Street in Shanghai where demonstrations happened in November — also saw heightened security.

The British Embassy in Beijing posted the June 4, 1989, front page of China's mouthpiece People's Daily that showed a small report about how hospitals were inundated with casualties. Within 20 minutes, censors removed the news, the embassy tweeted on Sunday.

Hong Kong authorities were vigilant in the weeks before June 4, with police seizing a commemorative "Pillar of Shame" statue for a security trial and books on the Tiananmen crackdown removed from public libraries.

Former pro-democracy district councillor Debby Chan said last week police had called her to ask about her June 4 plans after she announced on Facebook that she would hand out free candles — which are seen as representing a vigil. On Sunday, there were pockets of defiance around Hong Kong — a shop gave away candles, while a bookstore displayed Tiananmen Square archival material.

'Face the consequences'

Sidestepping questions about whether public mourning was allowed, Hong Kong's leader John Lee had maintained that the public must act according to the law or "be ready to face the consequences".

Vigils are planned around the world, from Japan to London, where a re-enactment of the Tiananmen crackdown will take place at Trafalgar Square on Sunday. In self-ruled Taiwan, which China claims as its territory, workers set up a small replica of the "Pillar of Shame" on Sunday in preparation for a candlelight vigil.

"The history and the memory will not be wiped out easily," said Hong Konger Sky Fung, secretary-general of Taiwan-based NGO Hong Kong Outlanders. "The spark is still in our hearts." — AFP

Fourteen killed in southwest China landslide

BEIJING: Fourteen people were killed and five are missing following a landslide in southwestern China's Sichuan province on Sunday, the local government said. The "collapse took place high on a mountain" at 6 am (2200 GMT Saturday) at a state-owned forestry station in Jinkouhe, near the city of Leshan, the local government said in an online statement.

"As of 3:30 pm, the remains of 14 victims have been recovered, while five people remain missing," it said. Authorities sent more than 180 people and a dozen pieces of rescue and recovery equipment to the site, according to the statement.

"Currently, search and rescue work is urgently underway," it said. The site is in a mountainous region about 240 kilometres (150 miles) south of the provincial capital Chengdu. Landslides are a frequent danger in rural and

mountainous parts of China, particularly during the rainy summer months.

Contacted by AFP, an official in Jinkouhe's publicity department declined to give further comment on Sunday's landslide. The settlement of around 40,000 people lies between verdant mountains and a wide river and its economy largely runs on forestry, power generation, agriculture and other industries.

Remote and densely forested, much of Sichuan is particularly prone to disasters. Extreme weather triggered a series of landslides in the province in 2017, including one that completely buried the mountain village of Xinmo, entombing more than 60 homes. In 2019, massive rains again caused a slew of landslides, including one that buried a section of railway under repair and those working on it. The province is also seismically active and periodically experiences deadly earthquakes.

A 7.9-magnitude quake in 2008 left more than 87,000 people dead or missing, including 5,335 school pupils. Although China has strengthened safety protocols in its extractive industries in recent years, accidents still frequently occur. — AFP

Uganda reports 54 peacekeepers killed in attack

KAMPALA: Some 54 Ugandan peacekeepers died when militants besieged an African Union base in Somalia last week, Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni said, in one of the worst recent attacks by Al-Shabaab jihadists in the war-torn country.

"We discovered the lifeless bodies of 54 fallen soldiers, including a commander," Museveni said in a Twitter post late Saturday. The veteran leader was speaking during a meeting with members of his governing National Resistance Movement party, the presidency told AFP on Sunday.

The toll is one of the heaviest yet since pro-government forces backed by the AU force known as ATMIS launched an offensive against Al-Shabaab last August. It was also a rare admission of a major military death toll by African Union members.

Al-Shabaab, which has been waging a deadly insurgency against Somalia's fragile central government for more than a decade, claimed responsibility for the May 26 attack, saying it had overrun the base and killed 137 soldiers.

Al-Shabaab is known to exaggerate claims of battlefield gains for propaganda purposes, and the governments of nations contributing troops to the AU force rarely confirm casualties. The militants drove a car laden with explosives into the base in Bulo Marer, 120 kilometres (75 miles) southwest of the capital Mogadishu, leading to a gunfight, local residents and a Somali military commander told AFP.

Museveni had already said last week that "some of the soldiers there did not perform as expected and panicked" as some 800 assailants attacked. That forced a withdrawal to a nearby base some nine kilometres (6 miles) away, he said, deploring "a missed opportunity to annihilate" the Qaeda-linked insurgents.

"The mistake was made by two commanders, Maj. Oluka and Maj. Obbo, who ordered the soldiers to retreat," Museveni said on Saturday, adding that they would face charges in a court martial. However, "our soldiers demonstrated remarkable resilience and reorganized themselves, resulting in the recapture of the base."

ATMIS has so far not disclosed how many people died, but said it sent in helicopter gunships as reinforcement after the pre-dawn raid. The United States also said it conducted an airstrike near the base a day after it was attacked. — AFP

Nepali guide rescues climber from Everest death zone

KATHMANDU: A Nepali guide abandoned his client's Everest summit bid to rescue a Malaysian climber in a deadly mountaineering season that has seen at least twelve deaths. Gelje Sherpa was guiding a Chinese client to the 8,849-metre (29,032-foot) peak and planned to assist him to paraglide down.

Instead, only a few hundred metres from the summit, they came across a lone man clinging to a rope and shivering in the area known as the "death zone". The area above 8,000 metres has earned its name because of its thin air, freezing temperatures and low oxygen levels that heighten the risk of altitude sickness. It is also notorious for its difficult terrain. "When I found him in that state, my heart did not let me leave him there," Sherpa told AFP.

Many other climbers had walked past the man that day, but he declined to criticize them. "It is a place where you have to think of your survival first," he said. Sherpa told his client — who will have paid at least \$45,000 to attempt Everest, including a permit fee of \$11,000 — to return without a summit. "When I decided to go down, my client did not agree at first. Of course, he was there after spending a lot of money, it must have been his dream for years and he had to find time to come here to climb."

"He got angry and said he wanted to go to the summit. 'I had to scold him and tell him that he has to descend because he was my responsibility and I couldn't send him to the summit on his own. He got upset.' He explained that he wanted to take the sick man down the mountain. 'Then he realized that by 'rescue' I meant that I wanted to save him. He understood and then he apologized later."

'You saved my life'

Sherpa, 30, fitted the ailing climber with his supplemental oxygen supply, improving some of his symptoms, but he was still unable to walk.

The rocky uneven terrain meant that Sherpa, who is about 1.6 metres tall (five feet and three inches) and weighs 55 kilograms, had to carry the Malaysian in some sections.

"It is a very difficult task to carry someone and bring them down from there. But some sections are very rocky, I couldn't drag him," said Sherpa. "If I did that, he could have broken his bones, he was already not doing well." Sherpa hauled the man down nearly 700 metres for almost six hours to Camp 4 by himself. "I've been a part of many search and rescue missions, but this was very challenging," he said.

Joined by another guide, the pair wrapped the climber in sleeping mats and secured him with ropes, dragging him on snowy slopes and carrying him on their backs when necessary.

Finally, they arrived at Camp 3 at 7,162 metres (23,500 feet) and a helicopter using a long line lifted the stricken climber down to the base camp. Sherpa was not able to meet the Malaysian climber again but received a message thanking him. "He wrote me 'You saved my life, you are god to me'," Sherpa said. — AFP



KATHMANDU: Nepali guide Gelje Sherpa speaks during an interview with AFP in Kathmandu. Gelje abandoned his client's Everest summit bid to rescue a Malaysian climber in a deadly season that has seen at least twelve deaths. — AFP