

Crash raises doubts about China's fast rail plans

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In this photo released by China's Xinhua News Agency, a bullet train passes a viaduct from which carriages fell after Saturday's crash near Wenzhou, east China's Zhejiang Province, Monday, July 25, 2011. Doubts about China's breakneck plans to expand high-speed rail across the country have been underscored by a bullet train wreck that killed dozens of people. (AP Photo/Xinhua, Xing Guangli) NO SALES

(AP) -- Doubts about China's breakneck plans to expand high-speed rail across the country have been underscored by a bullet train wreck that killed at least 39 people.

One train rammed into the back of another that had stalled after being hit by lightning Saturday in China's deadliest rail accident since 2008. Six carriages derailed and four fell about 65 to 100 feet (20 to 30

meters) from a viaduct. More than 190 people were injured.

[Railways](#) Minister Sheng Guangzu has apologized to the victims of the crash and their families. The U.S. Embassy in Beijing said two U.S. citizens were among the dead. The Italian Foreign Ministry said a 22-year-old Italian woman was killed while another Italian was injured.

The Railways Ministry and government officials haven't explained why the second train was apparently not warned there was a stalled train in its path.

One expert said he thought human error may have been involved.

"I think the problem may have come from the mistakes of dispatching management, instead of technological failure," said Qi Qixin, a professor at the Transportation Research Institute of Beijing University of Technology. "The system should have an ability to automatically issue a warning or even stop a train under such circumstances," he said.

The accident is the latest blow to China's [bullet train](#) ambitions. Designed to show off the country's rising wealth and technological prowess, the high-speed rail project has national prestige on par with China's space program.

Beijing plans to expand the high-speed rail network - already the world's biggest - to link far-flung regions and is also trying to sell its trains to Latin America and the Middle East. But critics say tickets are costly and the services do not really meet the needs of average travelers in many areas.

Last month, China launched to great fanfare the Beijing to Shanghai high-speed line, whose trains can travel at a top speed of 186 miles (300 kilometers) per hour. The speed was cut from the originally planned 217

mph (350 kph) after questions were raised about safety.

In less than four weeks of operation, power outages and other malfunctions have plagued the showcase 820-mile (1,318-kilometer) line. The Railways Ministry previously apologized for the problems and said that summer thunderstorms and winds were the cause in some cases.

Official plans for China's bullet train network to expand to 8,000 miles (13,000 kilometers) of track this year and 10,000 miles (16,000 kilometers) by 2020.

China's trains are based on Japanese, French and German technology, but the manufacturers are trying to sell to Latin America and the Middle East. That has prompted complaints that Beijing is violating the spirit of licenses with foreign providers by reselling technology that was meant to be used only in China.

Saturday's accident involved the first-generation bullet trains, which were launched in 2007 and have a top speed of 155 miles (250 kilometers) per hour - slower than the new Beijing to Shanghai trains.

The tragedy pummeled railway shares with China Railway Group sliding 7.7 percent. The high-speed rail woes added to negative sentiment from the U.S. debt deadlock, sending the Shanghai Composite Index down 3 percent to 2,688.75.

State broadcaster CCTV reported that 39 people were killed and 192 injured, according to the Railways Ministry.

The bullet train that lost power was traveling south from the Zhejiang provincial capital of Hangzhou and the crash happened in Wenzhou city.

Three top officials at the Shanghai Railway Bureau have been sacked,

and state-controlled media have raised questions, especially as rail travel moves hundreds of millions of people a year.

In an editorial entitled 'Train crash lesson for railway progress,' the Global Times said the accident should be "a bloody lesson for the entire railway industry in China."

The newspaper said the collision casts doubt on China's high-speed railway expansion plans because the country "lacks experience" as it seeks to join the top ranks of railway engineering.

It said China's high-speed railway has become "the newest target of public criticism," adding the accident should lead to "safer, not slower, railway transportation."

China's transportation authority ordered local departments at an emergency meeting Sunday to launch thorough safety overhauls to "resolutely curb" severe traffic accidents, the official Xinhua News Agency reported. The order follows a number of recent accidents, including a fire on a long-distance bus on Friday that killed 41 people.

CCTV reported Monday that a 2-year-old girl pulled from one of the derailed carriages 21 hours after the crash had undergone a three-hour operation. It said she had suffered lung, kidney and leg injuries and is now in intensive care. Her parents died in the crash.

An official at Saudi Railways Organization, the kingdom's train network operator, declined to comment on the Chinese crash or whether it might affect the company's decision to award a part of a lucrative high speed contract to a Chinese company.

"I cannot talk about this," said Ali Saad al-Karni, vice president for technical affairs at the state-run company. He said only the company's

president could discuss the matter, but he was on vacation and unreachable.

Saudi Railways in 2009 awarded a consortium including China Railway Construction Corp. a \$1.8 billion contract for work on a high-speed rail line linking the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina. That deal covers civil engineering work along the planned route, including the construction of bridges and tunnels.

Contracts covering the installation of track and the trains themselves haven't been awarded yet, though Chinese companies have been prequalified to bid for those deals too.

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