

China orders safety inspections after train crash

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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) -- The Chinese government on Tuesday ordered a two-month, nationwide safety campaign for its railway system after a collision between two bullet trains killed at least 39 people.

The Railways Ministry said in a statement on its website that all local railway bureaus were to draw lessons from Saturday's accident in the eastern city of Wenzhou and immediately launch safety inspections.

One train rammed into the back of another that had stalled after being hit by lightning, causing six carriages to derail and four to fall about 65 to 100 feet (20 to 30 meters) from a viaduct. More than 190 people were injured.

The ministry says local railway bureaus in various cities around the country such as northwestern Urumqi, southwestern Kunming, Harbin in the northeast and elsewhere have already begun safety checks.

The accident was 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. But rapid expansion of the services has been dogged by concerns about safety, corruption scandals and criticism that tickets are too expensive for ordinary Chinese.

The safety campaign announcement comes amid rising public anger and suspicion over the cause of the crash and the government's handling of the aftermath. The sacking of three top officials at the Shanghai Railway Bureau did little to tamp down criticism, especially on the Internet, that the government is more concerned with resuming operations on the affected train line than with the loss of life.

Coming under particular scrutiny has been the authorities' handling of the wreckage from the crash. Chinese reporters and bloggers have questioned the apparently quick decision to clean up the crash site. Images of excavators pushing the wreckage into pits circulated widely on the Internet, triggering speculation that the burial was an attempt to cover up evidence.

The usually staid China Central Television network raised questions that challenged the government to be more transparent.

"Why does the train carriage have to be buried? Before identifying the cause of the accident, we should not rule out that the train itself is problematic," CCTV commentator Ma Guangyuan said in a program aired Monday.

On Monday night, workers used excavators to dismantle the damaged train carriages, parts of which were trucked away for further investigation, footage aired by CCTV on Tuesday showed.

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. 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. Still, on Monday afternoon, more than 20 trains on the high-speed line were delayed due to a power failure, the official Xinhua News Agency said.

Railways Minister Sheng Guangzu said the inspection campaign would be held over two months, and apologized for the crash that was China's deadliest rail accident since 2008, the People's Daily newspaper said.

Sheng placed an emphasis on the safety of bullet trains, the report said, saying that research should be done to solve recurrent problems with the

trains' equipment.

The Railways Ministry and government officials have not explained why the second train was apparently not warned about a stalled train in its path.

The government also moved to compensate relatives of victims. The family of one victim agreed to accept payment of 500,000 yuan (\$77,500), the official Xinhua News Agency said Tuesday, citing the government of Wenzhou city.

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