

Human error seen as cause of German maglev train crash

AFP, Lathen

Investigators were working yesterday on the basis that human error caused a futuristic magnetic levitation train to crash in Germany, killing 23 people and setting back efforts to market the system.

The train, known as the Transrapid, was travelling at about 170km per hour on an elevated concrete monorail test track when it collided with a maintenance vehicle on Friday.

Although the Transrapid train remained on its track, the green and white service vehicle appeared to have been lifted on to the roof of the Transrapid by the force of the impact, photographs showed.

Two of the dead were US citizens who were visiting Germany while 11 German employees of an energy company were also killed, prosecutor Alexander Retemeyer said.

Ten people survived the crash and although some have serious injuries, their lives are not in danger.

Prosecutors said the collision in Lathen near the border with the Netherlands was caused by human error, possibly because of a breakdown in radio communication.



Rescue workers assess the damage yesterday at the scene where a service vehicle collided with a Transrapid train during a test run in Lathen. Investigators were working on the basis that human error caused the futuristic magnetic levitation train to crash, killing 23 people and setting back efforts to market the system.

Thousands evacuated as Kolkata flooded

3 people electrocuted

AFP, Kolkata

Three people were electrocuted and more than 2,000 evacuated after the heaviest rains in 23 years left large parts of the eastern Indian city of Kolkata under water, officials said Saturday.

Residents blamed the city's poor drainage system for failing to carry away the rainwater that had turned the city into a swamp.

But Mayor Bikash Bhattacharya said there was little the capital city of West Bengal state could do.

"It's hard to fight nature's fury," he said. "If it rains beyond our capacity, we can merely watch the city going under water and wait for it to limp back to normal."

Some of the city's roads were waist-deep in water and the rainwater had invaded homes and swanky shopping malls alike.

"Life has virtually grounded to a halt as vast tracts of the city are under water for a second day with transport off the roads," said deputy police commissioner P K Chattopadhyay.

Palestinian unity govt talks back to 'zero'

Says Abbas

AFP, Cairo/Gaza

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas said yesterday dialogue with Hamas on the formation of a national unity government had "returned to zero" after the Islamist movement refused to recognise Israel.

Abbas, returning to the Middle East from New York, where he met with US President George W. Bush, criticised "retractions" by Hamas leaders after they had agreed to form a national unity government.

"We had concluded an agreement for the formation of a government of national unity based on several points, among which in particular was to respect all of the agreements reached by the PLO (Palestine Liberation Organisation) and (to respect) the Arab peace initiative," Abbas said.

"We unfortunately returned to zero and we will negotiate again" with Hamas, he said after holding talks in Cairo with Egyptian

President Hosni Mubarak.

Hamas had agreed with Abbas earlier this month to form a national unity government, raising hopes the movement may finally agree to Western demands to renounce violence, recognize Israel and abide peace deals.

But on Friday, Hamas insisted a unity government would not recognise Israel and proposed a 10-year truce that was promptly rejected by the Jewish state.

The United States is emphatic that the three conditions must be met before a virtual international blockade on funds to the Palestinian Authority is lifted.

"The only way forward is to have a Palestinian Authority government ... that adopts the conditions laid out by the Quartet (the European Union, Russia, United Nations and the US) previously back in January," US State Department deputy spokesman Tom Casey said Friday.

In comments reported by the Egyptian news agency MENA,

Abbas invited Hamas to reconsider its position in the interests of the Palestinian people who were suffering from the suspension of international financial assistance.

"The situation of the Palestinian people is clear -- civil servants have been striking for four weeks, there is a blockade on Palestinian territories and any responsible person must take this into consideration," said Abbas.

Earlier more than 1,000 Palestinian officials demonstrated peacefully outside the office of Palestinian Authority President Mahmud Abbas Saturday to demand payment of salary arrears.

The protest coincided with the start of the holy month of Ramadan in the Palestinian territories during which Muslims traditionally try to buy small gifts and new clothes for children and meet for meals with family after a day of fasting and abstinence.

The protestors marched on the Palestinian parliament to Abbas's

office to call for payment.

The Palestinian Authority is suffering from severe financial problems because international donors suspended aid when Hamas -- viewed as a terrorist body by the United States and European Union -- won democratic elections and formed the Palestinian government last March.

The authority's 160,000 civil servants have only received part of their salaries since March and help for the unemployed has also not been paid. More than half the population of Gaza is out of work.

Both Washington and the European Union demand Hamas recognise Israel, abide by Palestinian accords signed with the Jewish state, and renounce violence. Hamas refuses to accept the demands.

Bush hails Pak, Afghan leaders ahead of talks

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush yesterday praised presidents Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan and Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan as "two courageous leaders" worthy of US help as they prepared for three-way talks next week.

"Next week, I will host a meeting at the White House with two courageous leaders, President Karzai of Afghanistan and President Musharraf of Pakistan. These two leaders are working to defeat the forces of terrorism and extremism," Bush said in his weekly radio address.

The White House says next Wednesday's summit, which comes after Bush met Musharraf on Friday and meets with Karzai on Tuesday, aims to make the neighboring countries "closer allies" in the US-led war on terrorism.

The leaders were expected to take up Afghanistan's complaints that Pakistan has not done enough to halt cross-border attacks by members of the Taliban militia ousted from power by US-led forces in late 2001.

They were also slated to discuss

Musharraf revelation rattles Pakistanis

AP, Islamabad

A report that the United States purportedly threatened military action against Pakistan shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks drew a sharp response and some protest in Pakistan Friday.

A spokesman for Pakistan's largest hard-line Islamic group predicted the issue would further enrage ordinary Pakistanis, who have long believed that they were forced "at gunpoint" into supporting the war on terror.

"The temperature and anger will rise among Pakistanis because they will see that the Americans do not want dialogue or communication, but are instead exploiting a situation and compelling (Pakistan) leader Gen. Pervez Musharraf to support them," said Ameer ul-Azameen, of the opposition Islamic coalition Mutahida Majlis-e-Amal, also called MMA.

Some 500 MMA supporters protesting in Islamabad on Friday against the pope's recent remarks on Islam also condemned Musharraf for not standing up to the United States following the Sept. 11

attacks. "Musharraf has sold his conscience, he has laid down under (President) Bush, he has stabbed Afghanistan in the back," said Hafiz Hussain Ahmad, a senior MMA leader.

Musharraf said that after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, Richard Armitage, the former American deputy secretary of state, warned Pakistan's intelligence chief that US forces could bomb Pakistan if it did not switch support from the pro-al-Qaeda Taliban regime in Afghanistan to the US-led war on terror.

"The intelligence director told me that (Armitage) said, 'Be prepared to go back to the Stone Age,'" Musharraf told CBS' "60 Minutes" in an interview to air Sunday.

Musharraf said he reacted responsibly. "One has to think and take actions in the interests of the nation and that is what I did."

But he added: "I thought it was a very rude remark." Armitage has said he never threatened to bomb Pakistan but that he delivered a tough message to the Muslim nation that it was either "with us or against us."



Thousands of anti-war supporters take part in a demonstration in Manchester, north-west England, yesterday protesting government policies in the Middle East and against nuclear weapons as Labour leader Tony Blair arrives in the city for his final Labour Party conference.

Blair facing renewed calls to quit now

AFP, Manchester

Tony Blair, at his last annual conference as Labour Party leader, faces Saturday fresh calls to withdraw British troops from Iraq in demonstrations that include one on his own doorstep.

A "peace camp" has been set up a stone's throw from his hotel in Manchester by families of British soldiers who have been killed, while a protest -- reportedly involving 25,000 people -- is planned for Saturday.

"We're expecting it (the protest) to be enormous," said David Wilson, from organisers the Stop the War Coalition, who were behind the February 2003 march that saw an estimated 750,000 people take to the streets of London.

Clinton faults Bush for inaction on Laden

REUTERS, Washington

Former President Bill Clinton, angrily defending his efforts to capture Osama bin Laden, accused the Bush administration of doing far less to stop the al-Qaeda leader before the September 11 attacks.

In a heated interview to be aired on Sunday on "Fox News Sunday," the former Democratic president defended the steps he took after al-Qaeda's attack on the USS Cole in 2000 and faulted "right-wingers" for their criticism of his efforts to capture Osama bin Laden.

"But at least I tried. That's the difference in me and some, including all of the right-wingers who are attacking me now," Clinton said when asked whether he had failed to fully anticipate bin Laden's danger. "They had eight months to try, they did not try. I tried. So I tried and failed."

The September 11 attacks occurred almost eight months after President George W. Bush succeeded Clinton in January 2001.

No army can disarm Hezbollah: Nasrallah

AP, Beirut

Hezbollah leader Sheik Hassan Nasrallah defied the international community in his first major appearance since the war with Israel, telling hundreds of thousands of supporters at a "victory" rally Friday that no army could disarm his militia.

Nasrallah said his guerrillas have replenished their arsenal and have more than 20,000 rockets, which they will never give up unless a stronger Lebanese government takes over.

The Iranian-backed leader's tough stance was aimed at demonstrating that Hezbollah was not weakened by UN peacekeepers and Lebanese troops deploying across southern Lebanon with a mandate to rein in the Shia guerrillas.

The gathering that sprawled over a swath of bombed-out south Beirut was a defiant show of Hezbollah strength and a challenge to the government of Prime Minister Fuad Saniora.

Police officials estimated 800,000 people -- mostly Shias but

including some Christians -- filled the 37-acre lot to hear Nasrallah, forming a sea of waving yellow Hezbollah banners, mixed with a smaller number of Lebanese flags.

In his first public appearance since Israel launched its offensive against Hezbollah on July 12, Nasrallah called for formation of a new government. He repeatedly attacked Saniora's administration, saying it was weak and unable to protect Lebanon from Israel.

"Tears don't protect anyone," the black-turbaned cleric said in a jab at Saniora, who wept several times in speeches during the Israeli assault as he pleaded for international support.

Nasrallah said his group would keep its arms until Lebanon has a stronger government. Giving up weapons now "under this government ... means leaving Lebanon exposed before Israel to kill and detain and bomb whomever they want, and clearly we will not accept that," he said.

Nepalese legislator killed by gunmen

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Unidentified gunmen shot and killed a member of Nepal's parliament yesterday, police and officials said.

Krishna Charan Shrestha, a member of the Rastriya Prajatantra Party, was shot outside his home by three gunmen on motorcycles at Belaha village in Siraha district, 150 km east of the capital, Kathmandu.

"He was rushed to the hospital where he was declared dead," a police officer told Reuters, adding that one of Shrestha's aides was also wounded in the attack.

Authorities said that two of three assailants were later caught and killed by villagers, but it was still not immediately clear who they were or why the politician had been killed.

Shrestha's party is the fourth largest group in the Himalayan nation's parliament, but it is not a member of the seven-party alliance that rules the country now.

Pakistan puts off signing F-16 deal with US

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan has put off signing the letter of acceptance (LOA) for purchase of 36 F-16 fighters from the US after complaints from its air force that the planes were "bereft" of vital electronic warfare systems.

After the complaints, Pakistan's Ministry of Defence asked the US Secretary of Air Force International Affairs, (Saifa), which is the coordinator and supervisor for the project, to extend the signing of LOA until December 31, Pakistani weekly Friday Times reported.

The last extension was sought on July 31 this year.

The deal was apparently deferred partly due to conditions imposed by the US on the operations of F-16s and the "absence" of vital electronic capabilities from these platforms.

Musharraf was expected to take up these issues when he meets President George W. Bush in Washington on Friday.



Lebanese soldiers search for mines near the Israeli-Lebanese border yesterday after Israeli soldiers left their position in the southern town of Naqura. Lebanese soldiers backed by UN peacekeepers deployed yesterday for the first time in decades at posts on the volatile border with Israel, as the Hezbollah chief boasted his Shia guerrillas were stronger than ever.