Beat: Miscellaneous

Death toll rises to 63 after DR Congo train derailment

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USPA News - The death toll after a speeding freight train derailed in the southeastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo has risen to at least 63, but dozens more may still be trapped in the wreckage, officials said on Wednesday, more than a day after the accident. Katanga province interior minister Dikanga Kazadi said the casualty figures had increased to 63 dead and 80 injured by Wednesday afternoon, but dozens more could still be trapped under debris.

Many of the injured were in a serious or critical condition and some of them had died of their injuries overnight. "Ten carriages are lying completely destroyed nearly three meters (9.8 feet) from the track," Community Radio Katanga reporter Hyppolyte Kalenga said at the site of the disaster. "Right next to (the carriages) are 31 bodies arranged next to each other. There are 55 seriously injured people, some of them are moaning." The accident happened at around 10 a.m. local time on Tuesday when a freight train belonging to the Congo National Railway Company (SNCC) derailed on a slope near a bridge in the town of Katongola, located about 50 kilometers (31 miles) from the city of Kamina in Katanga province. Freight trains in the country often also take passengers, with some of them sitting on top of the carriages. Many victims of Tuesday`s accident had already died of their injuries when rescue workers arrived hours after the accident, which scattered freight across the site. "Nearly four hours after the accident, you could still see the arms or legs of some dead people whose bodies remain trapped in what remains of the wagons," Kalenga said. Some of the victims who were trapped in the wreckage called out for help in the hours after the derailment, but no one came. "According to the head office of the administrative supervision of Katongola, bodies were carried away by their families on the order of the magistrate who was sent by the prosecutor of Kamina," Kalenga said. Julien Nyamwenyi, a reporter for Radio Okapi, which is backed by the United Nations (UN) and is one of the country`s leading stations, said the National Assembly in the capital Kinshasa decided on Wednesday to form a commission to go to the city of Lubumbashi in Katanga province to "shed light on this situation." Kazadi said the train is believed to have traveled at a speed of about 60 kilometers (37 miles) per hour in an area where the speed limit is 40 kilometers (24.8 miles) per hour, which was backed up by witness accounts. "We observed that the train changed speed. It seemed like the train`s engine went out of control, and the locomotive and the coach fell," one of the passengers told Radio Okapi on Tuesday. The witness said he was unable to find three people who had been sitting next to him on the train. "I do not see them. We`ll have to raise the coaches to see who is stuck under. Until now, there`s been no help whatsoever," he said. "The driver of the locomotive also died. Everybody who was in the coach died." Radio Okapi said the train was traveling from Kamina to the town of Mwene-Ditu in neighboring Kasai-Oriental province. The state-run Congolese News Agency (ACP) did not mention the accident in either Tuesday`s or Wednesday`s dispatches. News from the country is often slow to emerge. The Democratic Republic of Congo, which has endured political and social turmoil since gaining independence from Belgium in 1960, relies on a rail network that was built more than 100 years ago. Most of the network has received little to no maintenance since 1960, even though trains and planes are the most important means of transport in a vast country with few paved roads outside the capital Kinshasa. Tuesday`s accident followed three separate train accidents in February, killing a total of at least 20 people and highlighting the poor state of the country`s rail network. The most recent major train accident happened in August 2007 when a train overturned near Benaleka in Kasai-Occidental province, killing at least 100 people and injuring 220 others.

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