

Death toll climbs to 71 in Japan train crash

BY MARI YAMAGUCHI
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

AMAGASAKI, Japan — The death toll rose to 71 on Tuesday as crews pulled more victims from the wreckage of Japan's deadliest rail crash in decades. Investigators focused on whether excessive speed or the driver's inexperience caused the train to derail and slam into a building.

The seven-car commuter train carrying 580 passengers derailed Monday morning near Amagasaki, a suburb of Osaka about 250 miles west of Tokyo. It hit an automobile and then a nine-story apartment complex. More than 440 people were injured.

Crews pulled 14 more bodies from the twisted rail carriages, pushing the death toll from 57 to 71.

Two of the five derailed cars were shoved inside and flattened against the wall of the building's first-floor parking garage.

Relatives rushed to hospitals looking for loved ones who might have been injured or killed in the

5:18 a.m. crash.

"I only saw him the night before," said Hiroko Kuki, whose son died in the crash. "I wish he were alive somewhere ... I wish it were only a nightmare."

Takamichi Hayashi said his elder brother, 19-year-old Hiroki, might be among those still in the wreck.

He said Hiroki had called their mother twice on a mobile phone from inside one of the train cars hours after the crash but remained unaccounted for.

"He told my mother: 'I'm in pain. I'm not going to make it,'" Hayashi said.

Officials said no cause had been ruled out but added that investigators suspect speed and the driver's lack of experience on the job.

The driver, Ryujiro Takami, 23, was unaccounted for.

He received his train operator's

license in May. A month later, he overshot a station and was issued a warning, railway officials and police said. Passengers said he also stopped too far past a station platform Monday just before the crash.

Tsunemi Murakami, safety director for West Japan Railway Co., said it had not been determined how fast the train was traveling.

A surviving crew member told police he "felt

the train was going faster than usual," public broadcaster NHK said.

Other passengers also speculated the driver might have been speeding to make up for time lost when he overshot the previous station by 25 feet and had to back up. The train was nearly two minutes behind schedule, media reports said.

The crash occurred on a curve with a speed limit of 43 mph.

Murakami estimated the train would have had to be traveling at 82 mph to have jumped the track purely because of excessive speed.

Some stretches of track in Japan have safety systems designed to stop trains at any sign of trouble without requiring drivers to take emergency action, but transport ministry officials said the automatic braking system along the stretch of track where the train crashed is among the oldest in Japan and can't halt trains traveling at high speeds.

Outside experts predicted investigators would find a combination of factors to blame.

"There are very few train accidents in Japan in which a train has flipped just because it was going too fast. There might have been several conditions at work — speed, winds, poor train maintenance or aging rails," Kazuhiko Nagase, a train expert and professor at the Kanazawa Institute of Technology, told NHK.

"For the train to flip, it had to be traveling at an extremely high speed," Nagase said.

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KAZUHIKO NAGASE | Train expert

Train derails in western Japan

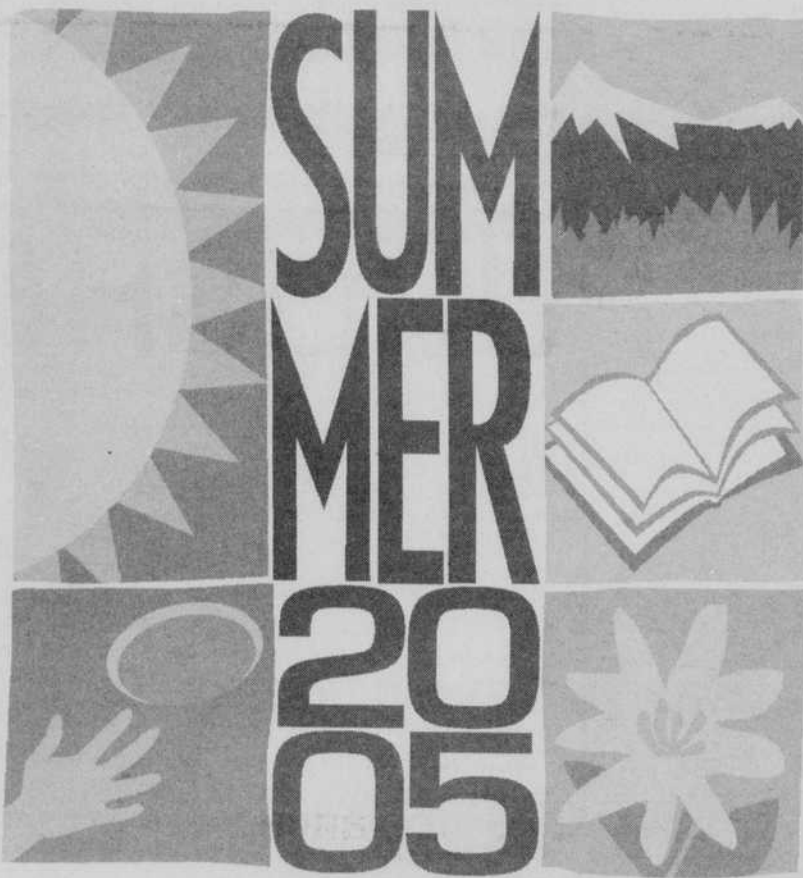
A commuter train carrying 580 passengers derailed in western Japan Monday, killing at least 57 people and injuring 441.



SOURCES: ESRI; NGA

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IN BRIEF

Iraqi politicians discuss transitional government

BAGHDAD, Iraq — Iraqi politicians on Monday again tried to end a deadlock over the formation of the country's new transitional government, while the death toll from two well-coordinated militant attacks against Iraqi police and civilians rose to 29.

Insurgents, meanwhile, launched another attack on Iraq's oil facilities, using explosives to set fire to oil pumps used for domestic supplies near Kirkuk, an official at Northern Oil Company said on the condition of anonymity. No injuries were immediately reported.

On Sunday, lawmakers loyal to Prime Minister-designate Ibrahim al-Jaafari said he was ready to announce a Cabinet that would exclude his interim predecessor, Ayad Allawi.

Some members of Al-Jaafari's political block said he had decided to shun further attempts to include members of the party headed by Allawi, the secular Shiite politician who had served as prime minister as the country prepared for elections Jan. 30.

Pope reaches out to Christians, Muslims

VATICAN CITY — A day after reaching out to other Christians and to Jews in his installation Mass, Pope Benedict XVI met with members of the Muslim community Monday and assured them that the church wanted to continue "building bridges of friendship."

Benedict made the comments in a meeting with religious leaders who attended his installation ceremony, saying he was particularly grateful that members of the Muslim community were present.

"I express my appreciation for the growth of dialogue between Muslims and Christians, both at the local and international level," he said.

"Peace is also a duty to which all peoples must be committed, especially those who profess to belong to religious traditions," he said. "Our efforts to come together and foster dialogue are a valuable contribution to building peace on solid foundations."

The Vatican didn't say which Muslim leaders went to the private meeting.

"I assure you that the church wants to continue building bridges of friendship with the followers of all religions, in order to seek the true good of every person and of society as a whole," he said.

— The Associated Press