

German prosecutors: High-speed train crash probe focusing on controllers

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BERLIN Two controllers overseeing the test track in northwestern Germany where a high-speed magnetic train crashed into a maintenance vehicle, killing 23, are being investigated on suspicion of involuntary manslaughter, prosecutors said Wednesday.

Prosecutors said evaluation of the eight channels of radio communication between controllers and the drivers of the magnetic levitation, or maglev, train, as well as the maintenance vehicle it struck on Sept. 22, indicated human error had caused the crash, which also injured 10.

On the tapes, the drivers of the vehicle can be heard informing controllers they were in position and awaiting the command to return to the garage, said Joerg Schroeder, a prosecutor leading the investigation.

About 25 minutes later, the controllers told the driver of the train to proceed, leading to the impact at roughly 170 kph (110 mph), he told reporters in Lingen.

After the crash, someone could be heard asking "What happened?"

The answer from controllers: "Someone forgot to remove the maintenance vehicle from the track."

Had either of the two drivers of the train survived the crash, they also would have been included in the investigation, as they should have been able to see the vehicle from the cockpit of the train, said Alexander Retemeyer, a spokesman for prosecutors.

Neither of the controllers, whose identities have not been released, have been questioned, Retemeyer said, as they remain under shock. Both are also suspected of bodily injury due to negligence, he said.

Of the 10 survivors, nine have been able to leave the hospital, said Karl-Heinz Brueggemeir, who is leading the investigation.

Because the maintenance vehicle was not integrated into the track's electronic security system showing the train's location, there was no backup for human communication and visual checks by workers. The control center was required to ascertain where the maintenance vehicle was before allowing the train to proceed.

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Maglev trains ride on a cushion of magnetism instead of rails, which eliminates friction and helps make possible speeds of up to 450 kph (270 mph). The train is made by Transrapid International, a joint company of Siemens AG and ThyssenKrupp AG, but Germany has instead adopted conventional trains for its high-speed service.

The only commercial maglev lines are in Shanghai, China and Nagoya, Japan.

Associated Press Writer Imke Zimmermann contributed to this report from Lingen, Germany.