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Japan to Invest in Magnetic Trains

By HANS GREIMEL Associated Press
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TOKYO — Central Japan Railway Co. will invest 355 billion yen (US\$3.1 billion; euro2.4 billion) to develop high-speed magnetic trains in Japan over the next decade, the company said Monday, just days after deadly crash of an experimental magnetic train in Germany.

The spending will expand a test track just west of Tokyo in Yamanashi prefecture and fund new magnetically levitated, or "maglev," trains carriages. The announcement comes after a maglev crashed Friday on a test track in Germany, killing 23 people.

The move comes as Germany and Japan jostle to win new customers for the high speed trains, which are the fastest in the world. Skimming over a guideway on powerful magnetic fields without touching the track, they can reach speeds of up to 581 kilometers (360 miles) per hour.

The technology is still under development, although there are two short stretches of commercially operating maglev trains, one in Shanghai and the other in the central Japanese city of Nagoya.

German Traffic Minister Wolfgang Tiefensee was in China at the time of the accident trying to urge officials there to extend their use of the German-made technology along the Shanghai, a contract that Japan competed for but lost.

"We can't speak for the German company," Central Japan Railway spokesman Taro Yoshikawa said. "But we've conducted extensive testing on our technology, and from a safety point of view, there are no concerns."

There have been no fatalities in test runs of the company's maglev, and the train has set a speed record with passengers aboard of 581 kilometers (360 miles) and hour, Yoshikawa said.

The German-built maglev in Shanghai has safety systems that would prevent the type of crash that occurred last week, said Chang Wensen, a professor at the Maglev Research Center at the National University of Defense Technology in the central Chinese city of Changsha.

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That line has computerized systems that prevent two trains from being on one track at the same time and that automatically stop the train if there is an obstacle ahead, Chang said.

Chinese experts already were reassessing the Shanghai maglev's safety following an Aug. 11 fire in an electrical storage compartment beneath the passenger cabin that created large amounts of smoke but caused no deaths or injuries. Preliminary investigations attributed that mishap to an electrical fault.

"The accidents in Shanghai and Germany will have some impact but will not hinder the development of the maglev," Chang said.

"The maglev technology itself has no problem," he said. "The problems are in the running of the maglev."

The operators of the line, Shanghai Maglev Transport Development Co., had no comment Monday.

Shanghai's maglev line covers the 30 kilometers (19 miles) to the city's Pudong International Airport in just eight minutes at speeds of up to 430 kph (270 mph). Launched in early 2004, it is the world's first commercially operating magnetic levitation train line.

Central Japan Railway said over the weekend that the German crash won't affect its testing plans, but the Japanese government said it is closely watching what German investigators conclude about the cause of the crash.

Central Japan Railway completed a maglev test run Saturday with about 100 passengers, and the company is still planning a special event on Nov. 22-24, inviting 1,800 people to ride the train at its test center.

Japan's only commercially operating magnetic-levitation train, the local Linimo train near Nagoya, carries passengers on a 8.9-kilometer (5.5-mile) track at top speeds of 100 kilometers (62 miles) an hour.

Planners eventually want Japan's maglev service to connect Tokyo and Osaka with high speed trains, shortening the trip between Japan's two biggest cities to an hour, compared with the Shinkansen bullet train's 2.5 hours.

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