



A woman cries after hearing the news of her daughter's death after a deadly collision of three trains in Balasore district in the eastern state of Odisha, India, June 3, 2023. At least 275 people died when three trains crashed. More than 1,000 others were wounded. (OSV News photo/Adnan Abidi, Reuters)



by OSV News

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Balasore, India — June 5, 2023

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Government authorities June 4 were working to get rail services back in operation in the district of Balasore after the deadliest train crash in India in decades killed 275 people and injured at least 1,000 June 2.

At the Vatican, Pope Francis during his Sunday Angelus remembered the victims of a crash that involved three trains. "May our heavenly Father receive the souls of the deceased into his kingdom," he said, echoing a papal telegram sent to the apostolic nuncio of India. The pope June 4 also assured the injured he is close to them and their families.

CNN and other news outlets reported June 4 that the death toll was lowered to at least 275, after officials found that some victims had been counted twice during the chaos that followed the crash. The number of injured was reported variously as about 900, more than 900 and at least 1,000. Two days after the crash, news outlets were consistently reporting at least 1,000 injured. By June 4 rescue efforts had ended and the derailed cars had been removed from the tracks.

The crash occurred in Odisha state in eastern India about 137 miles southwest of Kolkata, the home of St. Teresa and her Missionaries of Charity. Kolkata is in the neighboring state of West Bengal.

The Associated Press reported chaotic scenes that erupted at night after the derailment around 7 p.m. local time June 2. According to the BBC, citing Indian officials, several carriages from the Shalimar-Chennai Coromandel Express derailed in Balasore district, hitting a stationary goods train. Several of its coaches ended up on the opposite track. Then the third train -- Howrah Superfast Express traveling from Yesvantpur to Howrah -- hit the overturned carriages.

Fr. Lijo George, social work director of the Balasore Diocese in Odisha state, was coordinating the Catholic Church's voluntary work at the accident site, with priests, religious sisters and lay church volunteers helping the wounded.

The priest told UCA News June 3 that for sometime after the accident he saw that "many trapped in the mangled compartments of the crashed trains (had) yet to be brought out."

"By 10 p.m. (June 2) we were able to rescue the survivors. After that it was about picking up dead bodies," Sudhanshu Sarangi, director of Odisha state's fire and emergency department, told AP. "This is very, very tragic. I have never seen anything like this in my career."

In a June 3 telegram, Francis said he was "deeply saddened to learn of the immense loss of life caused by the train crash" and assured "all affected by this tragedy of his spiritual closeness." The telegram was sent to Archbishop Leopoldo Girelli, the apostolic nuncio to India, on the pontiff's behalf by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican secretary of state.

The pope entrusted the souls of the deceased "to the loving mercy of the Almighty," and sent his "heartfelt condolences to those who mourn their loss." He offered prayers "for the many injured and for the efforts of the emergency service personnel," invoking upon everyone "the divine gifts of courage and consolation."

A man named Suryaveer told the BBC his mother and grandmother were on the train, going to the city to buy medicines. He found his grandmother alive, but his mother died in the crash.

Another local resident, Girija Shankar Rath, told the BBC that "there was chaos. There was a loud sound and there was smoke all around."

George told UCA News that the bodies of the deceased were taken to a school "and another building close to Balasore district hospital where hundreds injured are undergoing treatment."

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"Our priests and nuns along with church volunteers are helping the wounded passengers in the hospital to contact their family members and relatives," the priest said.

The church volunteers also were arranging food, clothing, masks, gloves and other assistance to the rescue teams and medical teams working in the hospital with limited space, he said.

"Doctors and other paramedical teams from nearby areas have already reached the hospital and are providing treatment to the injured passengers and surgeries are also going on for those in need," the priest said.

"The people are kept in hospital corridors and other places in the hospital campus following shortage of beds, but everyone is taken care of," George added.

The district administration blocked the main routes leading to the hospital from the accident site for the general public to avoid obstacles to the ambulances and rescue teams involved in bringing the injured to the hospital.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi in a message said he was "distressed by the train accident in Odisha. In this hour of grief, my thoughts are with the bereaved families. May the injured recover soon."

Railways Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw ordered a high-level probe into the train accident.

"The accident was unfortunate, and the rescue operation began shortly after the incident was reported to his ministry," Modi said.

CNN and other news outlets quoted Vaishnaw as saying the accident had occurred "due to a change in electronic interlocking" and that an investigation would show "who was responsible for that mistake."

The Catholic bishops' conference of India in a statement offered "prayers and sympathies on the sad demise of so many people" and wished for quick recovery of the injured.

The bishops also called on the government "to find out the cause of such a huge mishap and to take steps to see that in future such massive tragedies are avoided."

India is the world's most populous country with 1.42 billion people. It has the largest train network under one management in the world. Despite government efforts to improve rail safety, several hundred accidents occur every year on India's railways.