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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Metro Officials Dismissed Warnings in Weeks Before Deadly Crash

By Anna Dolgov

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Members of the emergency services wait outside a metro station following an accident on the metro in Moscow.

Subway officials in the weeks before a deadly crash on the Moscow metro brushed aside complaints of rattling cars on the stretch of the line where the accident took place, according to comments and letters published on Russia's social networks.

Following the crash on Tuesday that killed at least 22 people and injured more than 160 others, several Muscovites recounted online their attempts to draw official attention to the condition of the rail line between the western Slavyansky Bulvar and Park Pobedy metro stations, where the crash took place. Subway employees dismissed the concerns and questioned the riders' knowledge of the rail conditions, according to the accounts.

Facebook user Sergei Molostvov said Tuesday that he had contacted the metro's customer service on June 15 to ask the subway to investigate "heightened vibrations" of train cars

on the leg of line between the two stations and to repair the rails. He also posted a screenshot of the complaint form he had submitted, which specifically named the leg of track between Slavyansky Bulvar and Park Pobedy on the city's Dark Blue Line

"The cars are shaking so badly that it is difficult to stand," Molostov wrote in his complaint form.

The metro response dated July 8, just a week before the crash, said the "rails are maintained in accordance with technical norms and allowances, no violations in the maintenance of [rail] joints have been found, the size of gaps between joints corresponds to technical norms."

Another Muscovite, Artur Zhuravsky, said on his Facebook page that he rode the same line just a week before the accident and noticed train cars joggling forcefully side to side amid a roaring noise.

Metro Police Called Juggling Wagons Normal

Zhuravsky said he approached a metro police officer with a major's insignia at a nearby station to report the rattling, but the officer responded that "this is normal." Zhuravsky said he had then called the metro's hotline to report his concerns, but the only thing the operator wanted to know was: "Are you a specialist?"

"Now there are a lot of specialists there, up to [Moscow Mayor Sergei] Sobyanin," Zhuravsky wrote of the authorities' response to the crash.

Workers Fired Over Defective Parts

Concerns about attention to safety also extended to those working on the metro system. In spring, Russia's Metrovagonmash company that builds cars for the Moscow metro fired 16 of its workers after they refused to install defective parts on rail cars, Russkaya Planeta news portal reported at that time, citing head of the workers' independent trade union Vyacheslav Babochkin.

Defective parts caused a series of accidents on the Moscow subway last year — though none of them deadly — and Metrovagonmash was fined 6 million rubles (about $175,000), the report said.

The causes of the accident were still being investigated early Wednesday, though defects in rail points and switches or gaps between rail joints were named as possible culprits.

In another hypothesis of the possible causes of Tuesday's crash, an unidentified official familiar with the situation told Interfax that a defective part in the connection between a rail car and its chassis may have been at fault.

Ministry Hits Wrong Note in Online Statement

While transportation officials pledged to investigate and punish anybody responsible, and President Vladimir Putin expressed condolences to the families of those who were killed, the Moscow branch of the Emergency Situations Ministry briefly posted a flippant account of the crash, appearing to take a lighthearted view on the tragedy.

"The middle of the summer in the capital was hot, particularly for metro passengers who happened to be on the Arbatsko-Pokrovskaya [Dark Blue] Line," said the opening line of the report. The statement briefly appeared on the agency's website before it was removed, but a Google cached page was still available Wednesday morning.

"Today at 8:30 in the morning, on the line between Slavyanksy Bulvar and Park Pobedy stations, several rail cars were derailed," the report went on to say.

After praising emergency rescuers for their swift response to the scene, the report made a brief mention of the victims, saying that "there are no children among the casualties and the injured."

Inside Source Cites "Low-Grade Work" on Tracks

Preliminary reports blamed the accident on a decrease in the electric voltage running through the tracks. But the energy utility company that operates a power substation for the Dark Blue Line said in a statement that no voltage drops had been registered, Russian media reported.

An unidentified law-enforcement official told Interfax on Wednesday that according to preliminary investigative data, "low-grade work" in installing a rail switch on the night before the accident may have been to blame.

Yuri Yegorov, a railroads analyst with preservation group Archnadzor wrote on the capital's news portal Cityboom.ru that a malfunctioning switch or a gap between rail joints might have been at fault.

"The human factor might have also played a part," Yegorov added. "People might not have noticed a signal or decided to fix it tomorrow, but it caused an accident already today."

See also:

[At Least 21 Killed in Moscow Metro Rush-Hour Crash]

[Deadly Derailment in Moscow Metro (Video)]

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