

China recalls bullet trains in new blow to technology

by Fayen Wong and Chris Buckley

SHANGHAI/BEIJING (Reuters) — China's second-biggest train maker will recall 54 bullet trains used on the new showcase Beijing-Shanghai line for safety reasons, the firm said on Friday, dealing a fresh blow to the nation's scandal-plagued rail system.

The recall of the trains by China CNR Corp Ltd comes three weeks after 40 people were killed in a high-speed rail crash, which triggered public fury, unusually bold media coverage and a freeze on approvals for new railway projects.

China's high-speed rail drive was until recently held up by senior government officials as a trophy of the nation's technological prowess. Now it has become a political albatross, drawing scorn from many citizens long frustrated with the hulking railways ministry.

China's fast-growing microblog websites have served to amplify that public anger, and the recall drew more catcalls on Sina's popular Weibo site (<http://weibo.com>).

"Wasn't this locomotive the most advanced type, and put into use only after many tests? So how come the problems were discovered after they were put into operation? What a miracle," wrote one Weibo user.

"Can we also recall the Ministry of Railways?," asked another.

Officials blamed July's crash first on a lightning strike and then on faulty signals technology. But on Friday, Chinese media quoted a senior investigator as saying the crash also exposed management failings and could have been avoided.

"There were serious flaws in the system design that led to an equipment failure," said Luo Lin, the minister of China's State Administration of Work Safety, who is leading the probe.

"At the same time, this exposed problems in emergency response and safety management after the failure occurred," the Beijing Times cited Luo as saying.

"This was a major accident involving culpability that could have been totally avoided," he said.

Industry analyst Lu Zhou said the recalls added to signs that China's high-speed railway boom faced bleak times.

"The government is putting a sudden brake on China's high-speed railway story, and we must wait for the bad days to pass over," said Lu, an analyst with Everbright Securities in Shanghai who follows China's high-speed railway train makers.

"A Great Leap Forward-style movement in China's high-speed railway is changing abruptly to a period of silence, and that could last a few years," he said.

The Great Leap Forward was Mao Zedong's disastrous effort in the late 1950s to catapult China into communist prosperity.

But China could not afford to curtail train investment in the longer-term, said Luo.

"After all, China's railway system can't go back to the old days of shabby green cars," he said.

■ Recall could hit steel, cement demand

The recall and a decision to cut the top speeds of bullet trains nonetheless reflected a rethink by government leaders jolted into considering the risks of high-speed rail growth, said Zhao Jian, an expert on rail at Beijing Jiaotong University who has long criticized the bullet train expansion.

China has been working for years to develop a high-speed rail network to rival Japan's famed bullet trains, and last year investment on the sector hit a record high of 749.5 billion yuan (\$117.2 billion).

Japanese bullet trains have not had any accidents involving injuries or deaths since they started running in 1964, according to a Transport Ministry official in Tokyo.

Even before last month's crash and resulting furor, China's railways sector was under a cloud. The railways minister, Liu Zhijun, a key figure behind the boom in the sector, was dismissed in February over corruption charges that have not yet been tried in court.

As well as the embarrassment for the ruling Communist Party, the slow-down in high-speed rail building could bite into demand for steel, said UOB Kay Hian commodities analyst Helen Lau.

Passengers waiting to board bullet

trains from Beijing to Shanghai said they were not worried by news of the recall.

"The risk of an accident is definitely greater on these fast trains, but flying isn't any safer," said Zhang Kelong, a building materials salesman who said



A CRH380BL high-speed bullet train runs towards Beijing South Railway Station on July 25, 2011. (Reuters photo)

he was taking the Beijing-Shanghai high-speed service for the first time.

The government is stepping up safety demands, he noted.

"So the likelihood of another accident happening is small," he said.

"Let's just say I would have to be very

unlucky for that to happen."

Train maker CNR's President Cui Dianguo said the CRH380B-trains had "experienced a number of quality failings," and the recall would lead to a cut in services on the 1,318 kilometer (820 mille) Beijing-Shanghai route, which takes about 5 hours.

In an earlier statement, the state-owned company said it found faults in signaling systems, sensors and

communications components on the trains, which it blamed for delays in service.

Cui did not say how many services would be cut. But the rail ministry said it would reduce the number of trains using the high-speed line by a quarter,

the official Xinhua news agency said on Friday.

CNR's rival, China South Locomotive, built both of the trains involved in the crash last month.

The worries over high-speed rail are likely to force central government leaders to drastically reform the Ministry of Railways, possibly merging it into a transport super-ministry, said Zhao, the Beijing professor.

The ministry thwarted an effort to do that a few years ago.

"Now, it's going to happen sooner or later," said Zhao, referring to the merger. "That's the whole direction of reform, and it won't change. But I don't know when it will happen."

U.S. shocked and awed by the Taliban



COMMENT

by Pepe Escobar

Talk about a double whammy. It was not enough for Standard & Poor's to downgrade the United States' credit rating; with impeccable timing, and apparently a single shot, the Taliban in Afghanistan simultaneously downgraded the empire's colossal war machine.

As much as the U.S. power elite refuse to accept that the U.S. financial crisis was caused by years of George W. Bush tax cuts for the wealthy and mega-corporations; massive bailouts of banks and insurance companies; and astronomic military spending on the Pentagon's declinations of The Long War, the power elite will also refuse to acknowledge that the "new" war strategy in Afghanistan is also a failure.

■ Chinook down

The sound of that Chinook CH-47 transport helicopter shot down by a Taliban rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) in Wardak province, southwest of Kabul, on Friday, killing 38 people – including 19 U.S. Navy SEALs and seven Afghan commandos – was the full digital sound of the empire being shocked and awed into disbelief, no matter Pentagon efforts to practically order the media "not to read too much" into the crash.

Wardak – along with neighboring Logar – is now prime Talibanistan real estate. They are entrenched, know the terrain in detail and even have time to prepare complex operations. On top of it, the Taliban are "making progress" (Pentagon jargon) not only in their public relations skills and in adapting new weapons to the battlefield, but also in the mechanics of delivering a major psychological blow to the Western occupying forces.

The SEALs are part of a humongous, 10,000-strong Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) task force, based in Afghanistan, which has been involved in as many as 70 raids a day in AfPak, capturing – according to Pentagon spin – 2,900 "insurgents" and killing more than 800 from April to July. JSOC's global reach has been deconstructed in a piece by Nick Turse.

The SEALs killed in Wardak were part of the same unit, Team 6, involved in the Abbottabad raid that killed al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden in early May. But instead of flying the army's 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment's state-of-the-art stealth helicopters, the SEALs in Wardak were part of a rescue operation, riding a pedestrian National Guard Chinook.

As they were lifting off, they fell into a Taliban trap and were hit by a modified RPG – what the surgical Danger Room blog at the Wired website identified as an improvised rocket-assisted mortar (IRAM), sporting a bigger warhead than a shoulder-fired RPG.

According to Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid, that was indeed "a weapon that is similar to an RPG ...

and we are trying to get more of this weapon".

So assuming the IRAM – which has emigrated from the Iraqi battlefields – is now a player in Afghanistan as well, one might call it a warped return of the Stinger remix; during the 1980s Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union, a major game-changer was for the U.S. to drop hundreds of lethal Stingers into the hands of the mujahideen, wreaking havoc among the choppers of the mighty Red Army.

A close comparison between the Abbottabad and Wardak operations may raise a forest of eyebrows – apart from puncturing the myth of Navy SEALs as invincible, larger-than-life hunter-killers. In Abbottabad, as version after version of the raid was being fed to the media, it was finally established that a stealth helicopter simply "crashed". No one knows if this was a pilot error or the helicopter was shot at.

The fact is the "crash" left an intact tail section of the stealth helicopter inside the compound – that tail section that left the Pentagon freaking out it would be "sold" to the Chinese by the Pakistanis. It's quite a stretch to believe this crash generated no casualties – according to the Pentagon/White House spin.

And because the Bin Laden raid



U.S. President Barack Obama (R) participates in a ceremony at Dover Air Force Base August 9, 2011 in Dover, Delaware. The ceremony was to honor the return of the remains of 30 U.S. troops killed when the Taliban shot down their helicopter in Afghanistan. (Getty Images)

narrative was redacted over and over again, febrile minds are already linking these casualties to the Wardak death toll – implying the SEALs who actually died in the Abbottabad crash have now died "again" in Wardak. It doesn't help that the initial versions of the Wardak hit (later corrected or redacted) identified the SEALs as the same ones who took part in the "kill Osama" raid.

■ Pass the joystick

After the Wardak hit, new Pentagon chief Leon Panetta came up with the usual "stay the course" in Afghanistan speech while corporate media regurgitated that "all foreign combat troops are scheduled to leave by the end of 2014" – when everyone knows the Pentagon will never roll over, die and accept that kind of exit.

What Wardak will do is to bolster the Pentagon's case that the government in Kabul is mightily unprepared

to maintain security across the country – no matter the fact that the majority of Afghans want foreigners out, for good. While the White House/Pentagon are singing their remixed version of The Clash's Should I Stay or Should I Go, all the Taliban have to do is wait and see, in silence (they hate pop music). They know that Kabul taking over national security will only bolster their strategic position.

It's astonishing (or maybe not) that the Washington power elite simply does not register how the empire was mercilessly downgraded by the Taliban over this past month. The Taliban killed President Hamid Karzai's half-brother, drug lord and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) asset Ahmad Wali. They killed people at his funeral. They killed Karzai's head of tribal relations and a member of parliament. And they killed the mayor of Kandahar, Ghulam Hamidi.

Not a long time ago – the autumn of 2010 – the talk was of the U.S./North Atlantic Treaty Organization going to take over Kandahar in a major counter-insurgency drive and win the war against the Taliban for good.

Today the claim has been laid to rest by facts on the ground. Yet its conceptual artist – in typical Washington fashion – has been kicked upstairs. In

Iraq, General David Petraeus pulled an illusionist trick, convincing everyone in Washington that his 2007 surge/counterinsurgency drive was a success.

In Afghanistan, Petraeus was hit by a Hindu Kush rock on his head. Anyway, he's been promoted to CIA chief, so others will take the blame. And while more Chinooks will go down in Afghanistan, he can at least have fun with the joystick, playfully concentrating on droning the Pakistani tribal areas to death.

Pepe Escobar is the author of *Globalistan: How the Globalized World is Dissolving into Liquid War* (Nimble Books, 2007) and *Red Zone Blues: a snapshot of Baghdad during the surge*. His new book, just out, is *Obama does Globalistan* (Nimble Books, 2009). He may be reached at pepeasia@yahoo.com.

(Source: Asia Times Online)

J U M P

Gaza. Somalia. Humanity lives on

Continued from P. 1

I tried to make sense of all this as I struggled with my hunger pains. I questioned the wisdom of the whole endeavor. At times, I even challenged my mother. Fasting herself, she had no room for a self-indulgent, sacrilegious eight-year-old. "We fast to feel the pain of others," she said simply. Any child in a refugee camp could understand the meaning behind her words. Our refugee camp was rife with "others" in pain. One of them was Umm Ali, a mother forced to take her children out of school and send them to work as cheap laborers in Israel. Another was Abu Musa, a construction worker in Tel Aviv who just about managed to feed his own children, but never managed to repair his decaying house.

Since my family was also a member of the "others" club, I fasted. And like all the "others," I thanked God with a lowered gaze and extended arms.

Years later, in 1999, I joined a group of journalists and peace activists on a trip to Iraq. The aim was to stand in solidarity with all those devastated by the U.S.-led siege. According to modest UN estimates, hundreds of thousands of people – the majority of whom were children under the age of five – were killed as a result of the decades-long sanctions.

For this trip, we flew in from different countries and congregated in Jordan. I myself had flown in from the United States. One delegation member arrived from Gaza with nearly \$10,000 dollars, which he had collected from schools, mosques and the street. The Israelis didn't allow him to haul boxes of medicine donated by Gaza hospitals, and the Iraqis didn't allow him entry because his passport had been stamped in Hebrew letters. The young man left the money in trusted hands, asking them to purchase medicine for Iraqi children from Amman. As he turned back at the Jordan-Iraq border on the way back to Gaza, he asked me to convey the solidarity of Palestine and Gaza to the people of Iraq.

In this way, Gaza speaks. Gaza feels. Gaza takes stances and Gaza conveys regards.

Expectedly, the Horn of Africa famine is now generating quite a stir in Gaza. Starving Somalis are also now the "others" whose pain we are urged to feel. Eleven million people are reeling under the encroaching famine, and tens of thousands have already died. Somalia is the epic center of the disaster. The hunger of its people shames humanity to its core. Stories from the region tell of the absolute horror experienced by whole generations. Yet scenes of mothers tenderly comforting their dying children also tell a different story. It is a story of love, one that no statistic can capture, no politician can override.

Gaza, itself under a harsh Israeli siege imposed since Hamas was elected to power in 2006, has been one of the first places to respond to calls for help.

During a recent Al Jazeera interview, the head of a Somalia-based charity mission decried the lack of support his people were receiving. He lambasted the world, particularly Arabs and Muslims. He seemed puzzled by the fact that little support is reaching the victims even during the holiest of Muslim periods. Then he spoke of the aid arriving from Gaza. The news anchor cut him off quickly at this point, and moved on to a "related topic": aid sent by the Qatari government.

I wondered about it myself. Could Israel-besieged Gaza really be sending aid to famine-besieged Somalia?

Indeed.

One of multiple Gaza-led charity campaigns to aid Somalia is called "From Gaza: hand in hand to save the children of Somalia". According to Ma'an News Agency, this latest effort is led by the Arab Medical Union. "The campaign aimed to demonstrate the extent of physical cohesion between besieged Gaza and Somalia and that the Palestinian people are capable to support and stand with the Somali people," Ma'an reported on Aug. 2. Palestinians in the West Bank are also mobilizing around help for Somalia. The doctors' union has opened several bank accounts to accommodate donations.

My mother's generation must be immensely proud. Their endless sermons about the "pain of others" has registered well in the minds and hearts of their children. Somalis, too, I am certain, can fully appreciate the pain of Gaza.

Gaza. Somalia. Even in its darkest moment, humanity somehow lives on.

- Ramzy Baroud (www.ramzybaroud.net) is an author, internationally-syndicated columnist and the editor of *PalestineChronicle.com*. His books include *Searching Jenin*, and the *Second Palestinian Intifada*. His latest book is *My Father Was a Freedom Fighter: Gaza's Untold Story* (Pluto Press, London), available on *Amazon.com*.

Bahrain fires 23 pro-democracy medics

Continued from P. 1

Additionally, some doctors have been kidnapped by security forces of the regime.

The United Nations Human Rights office has criticized the Bahraini regime for its violations of international law by cracking down on activists and medical staff.

"It is vital that the authorities in Bahrain scrupulously abide by international standards. People should not be arbitrarily arrested, they should not be detained without clear evidence of their committed or recognized crime," said Rupert Colville, the UN's human rights spokesperson, in May.

■ Clashes continue in Manama

Meanwhile, witnesses have said that security forces in Bahrain's capital blocked roads around a former protest hub after clashes with pro-democracy demonstrators in the island.