

42 killed, mainly retirees, in French bus-truck collision

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Puisseguin, France: A truck and a bus transporting retirees on a day trip collided and caught fire Friday in wine country in southwest France, killing 42 people and badly injuring four others, authorities said. It was the nation's deadliest road accident in more than 30 years.

Images on French television showed the carcass of the bus "a collapsing, charred frame engulfed by smoke near the village of Puisseguin, about 50 kilometers (30 miles) east of Bordeaux. The seats were nothing but empty metal frames. Aerial views showed the mangled remains of both vehicles on a narrow, curving road surrounded by trees.

Eight people, including the driver, escaped from the bus after the driver opened the door, but others were trapped as flames quickly consumed the vehicles, Puisseguin Mayor Xavier Sublett said on i-Tele television.

One of those injured was the driver of a car who stopped and tried to help rescue people, legislator Gilles Savary told RTL radio.

French media said the truck driver was killed.

The mayor said on RTL radio that the truck driver lost control of the vehicle. The bus driver "tried to avoid it, but the truck came and hit it," Sublett said.

Dr. Philippe Flipot of Puisseguin said he spoke to the bus driver afterward. "He found himself facing a jack-knifed truck, he couldn't avoid it, he managed to open the doors and some passengers could get off the bus. Risking his life, because flames were licking him, he managed to evacuate some people," Flipot said on Europe-1 radio.

Other authorities remained cautious about the circumstances of the crash. An investigation is underway.

Police said the death toll was unusually high because both vehicles caught fire immediately. Scores of emergency workers rushed to the scene, and helicopters evacuated severely burned victims.

The accident was devastating for the surrounding communities. The bus was carrying members of a senior citizens' club from the town of Petit-Palais-et-Cornemps on a one-day ham-tasting trip in Arzacq-Arraziguet, about 200 kilometers (120 miles) away.

They had traveled just a few minutes, about seven kilometers (four miles), when the collision occurred.

Identifying the victims was difficult because the passenger list burned in the fire, Savary said.

Prime Minister Manuel Valls called it the deadliest road accident in France in more than 30 years, and a "terrible shock" for the country. The passengers "should have returned home tonight."

Questions surfaced about the safety of the road, and especially the curve. Legislator Noel Mamere, who represents the Gironde region where the accident occurred, said the collision was on an "extremely dangerous curve that is considered very accident-prone."

"That should make us question ourselves about political choices made in terms of infrastructure," Mamere said.

Legislator Savary said some roads in the region are in need of repair, but added that there's no way to ensure 100 percent safety on French roads.

The weather in the region was overcast Friday morning but not rainy.

Calling it an "immense tragedy," Hollande promised an investigation into what happened. Hollande, in Greece at the time of the accident, also expressed "the solidarity of the whole nation" with loved ones of the victims.

- AP