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In Japan Crash, Time Obsession May Be Culprit



Ko Sasaki for The New York Times

Rescue workers continued to try to free passengers who have been trapped inside the train's twisted cars since the accident on Monday morning.

By [NORIMITSU ONISHI](#)

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A MAGASAKI, Japan, April 26 - Anywhere else in the world, a train running 90 seconds late would perhaps be considered on time. But in Japan, 90 seconds would foil commuters who depend on trains' connecting to one another with balletic precision, often with only a couple of minutes to spare.






And so to make up for a lost 90 seconds, a 23-year-old train driver, it became increasingly clear on Tuesday, was speeding when his train jumped off the tracks on Monday morning at a curve here in western Japan and hurtled into a nine-story apartment building.

In this rusting industrial town just outside Osaka, rescue workers continued to try to free other passengers trapped inside the twisted and crumpled cars.

Across the country, the accident has already caused much soul-searching over Japan's attention - some would say obsession - with punctuality and efficiency. To many, the driver's single-minded focus on making up the 90 seconds seemed to reveal the weak points of a society where the trains really do run on time, but where people have lost sight of the bigger picture.

"Japanese believe that if they board a train, they'll arrive on time," said Yasuyuki Sawada, a 49-year-old railway worker, who had come to look at the crash site. "There is no flexibility in our society; people are not flexible, either."

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Mr. Sawada was one of many people who came to stand and watch behind the yellow police line here, and who saw deeper problems hidden in the accident.

"If you go abroad, you find that trains don't necessarily arrive on time," Mr. Sawada said. "This disaster was produced by Japanese civilization and Japanese people."

[The death toll in the accident, the deadliest in Japan in four decades, rose Wednesday to 91, Japanese news media reported.]

The Japanese search for rail perfection is relentless, from the humble commuter train to the country's most famous tracks. In 2004, on the 40th anniversary of the bullet train, there was much hand-wringing over the fact that a year earlier the trains on that line had registered on average a delay - of six seconds.

In Tokyo, the Yamanote line, which loops around the city core, has been making that trip ever more quickly thanks to better trains, down to 62 minutes in 1988 from 70 minutes in 1964 and 75 minutes in 1946, and, train officials project, under 60 minutes by the end of next year.

Train companies are secretive about delays. But any regular rider notices that they tend to be caused not by engineering mishaps but by events beyond human control, like typhoons and people jumping in front of trains. So confident is Japan in its trains' safety that there are no restrictions on how close residential buildings can be erected next to tracks: it is not rare to see them only three feet apart.

Keeping to increasingly packed and tight schedules has become all-important, not only for trains, but also for airlines. Japan Airlines said this month that a recent series of mishaps had been caused by its excessive focus on keeping to schedule.

The pressure to stay on schedule is so great, conductors apologize profusely even over a one-minute delay. In the United States and Europe, "late" often means a delay of six minutes or more.

"No question about it - there is no other rail system more punctual than Japan's," said Shigeru Haga, a professor of transportation and industrial psychology at Rikkyo University in Tokyo. "It's No. 1 in the world for its punctuality and safety."

"I personally think Japanese should relax more and think that two- to three-minute delays are no trouble. But you see people rushing up and down the station stairs to catch a train even if there's another one coming in two minutes."

This month, the West Japan Railway Company, the operator of the train involved in the crash, for the first time issued a statement to its employees saying that delays would betray customers' confidence.

It was perhaps with this statement in mind that the driver, Ryujiro Takami, directed a train heading into Osaka on Monday morning. Mr. Takami, whose body has yet to be recovered, had only 11 months of experience, and had been reprimanded once for overshooting a platform by 328 feet.



Ko Sasaki for The New York Times
The scene of the train crash in Amagasaki drew onlookers on Wednesday.

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