

Japan plans \$3.1B for high-speed trains

AP Associated Press

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A Japanese railroad will invest \$3.1 billion to develop high-speed magnetic trains over the next decade, the company said Monday, just days after a crash of an experimental magnetic train in Germany killed 23 people.

The spending by Central Japan Railway Co. will expand a test track just west of Tokyo and fund new magnetically levitated, or "maglev," trains carriages.

The move comes as Germany and Japan jostle to win new customers for the high speed trains, which are the fastest in the world. Skimming over a guideway on powerful magnetic fields without touching the track, they can reach speeds of up to 360 miles per hour.

The technology is still under development, although there are two short stretches of commercially operating maglev trains, one in Shanghai and the other in the central Japanese city of Nagoya.

German Traffic Minister Wolfgang Tiefensee was in China at the time of Friday's accident, trying to urge officials there to extend their use of the German-made technology along the Shanghai route, a contract that Japan competed for but lost.

"We can't speak for the German company," Central Japan Railway spokesman Taro Yoshikawa said. "But we've conducted extensive testing on our technology, and from a safety point of view, there are no concerns."

There have been no fatalities in test runs of the company's maglev, and the train has set a speed record with passengers aboard of 360 miles per hour, Yoshikawa said.

The German-built maglev in Shanghai has safety systems that would prevent the type of crash that occurred last week, said Chang Wensen, a professor at the Maglev Research Center at the National University of Defense Technology in the central Chinese city of Changsha.

That line has computerized systems that prevent two trains from being on one track at the same time and that automatically stop the train if there is an obstacle ahead, Chang said.

Chinese experts already were reassessing the Shanghai maglev's safety following an Aug. 11 fire in an electrical storage compartment beneath the passenger cabin that created large amounts of smoke but caused no deaths or injuries. Preliminary investigations attributed that mishap to an electrical fault.

"The accidents in Shanghai and Germany will have some impact but will not hinder the development of the maglev," Chang said.

"The maglev technology itself has no problem," he said. "The problems are in the running of the maglev."

The operators of the line, Shanghai Maglev Transport Development Co., had no comment Monday.

Shanghai's maglev line covers the 19 miles to the city's Pudong International Airport in just eight minutes at speeds of up to 270 mph. Launched in early 2004, it is the world's first commercially operating magnetic levitation train line.

Central Japan Railway said over the weekend that the German crash won't affect its testing plans, but the Japanese government said it is closely watching what German investigators conclude about the cause of the crash.

Central Japan Railway completed a maglev test run Saturday with about 100 passengers, and the company is still planning a special event on Nov. 22-24, inviting 1,800 people to ride the train at its test center.

Japan's only commercially operating magnetic-levitation train, the local Linimo train near Nagoya, carries passengers on a 5.5-mile track at top speeds of 62 miles an hour.

Planners eventually want Japan's maglev service to connect Tokyo and Osaka with high speed trains, shortening the trip between Japan's two biggest cities to an hour, compared with the Shinkansen bullet train's 2.5 hours.

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