

# INTERNATIONAL Herald Tribune

## Free Flow: Planned Europe-African rail link underlines U.S. shortcomings

By Don Phillips

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A mere 15 kilometers can be a frustrating distance when deep ocean water separates the two shores and many thousands of people want to travel between them.

Ferries are the obvious solution, but sometimes the number of people who want to travel leaves the ferry a poor method of transport. For instance, Continental Europe and England were connected by the \$20 billion Channel Tunnel, speeding and vastly increasing travel across the English Channel.

Now a high-speed rail line connecting Europe and Africa that has been on the drawing boards for a quarter of a century is finally being ushered along.

To join Spain and Morocco by rail across the Strait of Gibraltar would be among the world's most ambitious, expensive and complex civil engineering feats, alongside the Panama Canal and the Channel Tunnel. The project is now edging closer, with Morocco having hired Lombardi Engineering, a Swiss engineering firm, to begin planning.

Throughout the world, rail, one of the older forms of passenger transportation, is undergoing a renewal, with the Europe-Africa rail link being only one example of new passenger rail lines being considered.

Even in the United States, which is almost wholly dependent on the automobile and the airplane, passenger rail is stirring.

The United States is like a developing country when it comes to passenger rail, and various Democratic and Republican presidents have been nearly uniformly hostile to Amtrak, which was created in 1971 to relieve private railroads of the financial burden of passenger trains. Congress has consistently saved the trains, but without enough subsidies to expand.

The latest sign of U.S. passenger rail enthusiasm came as a surprise to many people. The administration of President George W. Bush has been antagonistic to Amtrak, openly working to quickly take the U.S. government out of the passenger rail business. Various states have been left with much of the financial burden for keeping the trains running.

But an odd thing happened on the trip to the passenger rail slaughterhouse. A new president was named for Amtrak, and he has surprised a few people.

Alexander Kummant, the new chief, probably surprised even his own board of directors by telling The New York Times that he not only favored passenger rail growth but also would continue to operate



long- distance passenger trains for the foreseeable future. Those long-distance trains should also continue to provide sleeping car space, something the board was already cutting back.

Even more surprising, he wants to find ways to finance significant numbers of new passenger cars and locomotives so Amtrak can grow by 50 percent over the next 5 to 10 years.

Kummant also wants Congress to fund new track for freight railroads, which operate most Amtrak trains, so that they will have the capacity to operate Amtrak trains on time.

As luck, or perhaps planning, would have it, Kummant made his statements just as a new Democratic Party majority prepared to take over in Congress. The Democrats were already planning legislation along the lines of Kummant's suggestions.

What will happen is anyone's guess, but the Amtrak board of directors, conservative though many members are, has had nothing to say.

This may well be described as progress, but it pales in comparison with what is happening in the rest of the world. France is completing a new Paris-Frankfurt TGV line, and the rest of the world is barreling ahead as well.

Korea now has high-speed rail. Taiwan is planning a high-speed line, and China is preparing for a web of high-speed lines throughout its eastern reaches.

But the Spain-Morocco line would be a truly significant breakthrough, not only connecting Europe and Africa by high-speed rail for the first time, but also providing the first high-speed line to operate in Africa.

Such a project could cost well over \$10 billion. If built, perhaps by 2025, the line would be one of the most complex engineering projects ever. The narrowest part of the Strait of Gibraltar is not suitable for a line because the water is more than 1,000 meters deep. Even a tunnel between Punta Paloma and Cape Malabata, at 40 kilometers, or 25 miles, length and 300 meters depth, would have to be pushed deep into unstable muck at the bottom of the strait, and the cost would be enormous. By comparison, the Channel Tunnel was built less than 70 meters deep in rock.

One of the odd quirks to the project is that high-speed rail may come to Africa before the first true high-speed line is built in the United States.

E-mail: [freeflow@iht.com](mailto:freeflow@iht.com)

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