

Religion

NTSB Senior Investigator David Rayburn examines the bus debris on Sunday in Sherman.

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Authorities begin interviewing bus crash survivors

By DANE SCHILLER, TERRI LANGFORD and JAMES PINKERTON
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Authorities began interviewing survivors Sunday to try to re-create the scene of the deadly charter bus crashed on U.S. 75 Friday that claimed the lives of 17 member of Houston's Vietnamese Catholic community.

Among other items, they're trying to figure out where passengers were sitting and whether anyone was able to evacuate, officials with the National Transportation Safety Board said at an afternoon press conference.

They said they haven't yet been able to interview the driver of the bus, 52-year-old Barrett Broussard, who remains in critical condition at Wilson N. Jones Medical Center in Sherman.

A dozen people died at the scene on U.S. 75 on their way to an annual religious festival in Missouri. Five others have died at hospitals, including two deaths Saturday. More than 30 others remain hospitalized in the Dallas area, including at least 11 in critical condition.

The NTSB hopes a data recorder, a similar device to the black box found on airplanes, will help re-create events leading up to the crash. A NTSB specialist will join investigators this week to determine whether any information can be retrieved, including how fast the bus was going and whether the driver was accelerating or braking at impact.

"We are still putting all the pieces of this investigation together," NTSB board member Debbie Hersman said. "It is too early for us to look at just one thing."

Broussard's blood was drawn for drug and alcohol testing, a standard procedure after an accident. Harris County records show Broussard was convicted of driving while intoxicated in 2001 and sentenced to 10 days in jail.

A year ago, Broussard was ticketed by a state trooper in New Waverly for not retaining a current driver's log for the previous seven days. The tour bus he was driving was placed out of service, and his 53 passengers had to wait for another bus.

No one answered the door or the telephone Saturday at Broussard's home in East Houston, where neighbors said he lives with his father.

Anthony Hall, 20, said he has known the Broussard family his entire life.

"He's an easygoing person," Hall said. "He's been a bus driver since I was little."

Failing safety checks

Officials have also uncovered numerous potential violations for two East Houston companies linked to the 2002 model bus, Angel Tours and Iguala Busmex, owned by 59-year-old Angel de la Torre.

The company operating the bus had its permit revoked recently and had failed recent checks, including keeping proper safety records.

Friday's accident was the deadliest Texas bus crash since 2005, when 23 elderly Bellaire residents died in a bus fire as they fled Hurricane Rita.

When news broke that the bus packed with pilgrims from two Vietnamese Catholic churches crashed on its way to an annual religious conference in Missouri, friends and family back in Houston scrambled for information.

Some relied on phones, fax machines and the Internet for their search. Others jumped in cars to make the drive to the city just south of the Oklahoma border.

Hospitals, police stations and funeral homes were nearly overwhelmed with callers desperate to know if their loved ones were among the dead or injured. Callers begged for anything to let them know what had happened to the travelers, who ranged in age from at least 9 to as old as 89.

Among the challenges in answering those questions was that many of the travelers had similar-sounding names, and

RESOURCES

1-866-GET-INFO

The Red Cross hot line for information for family members

903-217-7651

The Sherman Police Department number for family members wishing to claim property from the bus



Mourning bus crash victims

Grieving families and friends gathered at churches to remember victims of the bus crash that killed 17. Video by Jason Witmer and Steve Hackett. Edited by Jason Witmer. August 16, 2008

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the callers as well as the survivors often spoke little or no English, said Lt. Bob Fair of the Sherman Police Department.

"It got pretty hectic with people wanting to know where their loved ones were," Fair said. "It got pretty intense."

The slice of U.S. 75 where the bus crashed was also further swept with chaos as hearses, ambulances, fire trucks and police cars from as far as 40 miles away sped to the scene.

"We've got people crushed under the bus," a man told a 911 emergency operator, according to a recording released by authorities. "We need immediate help now."

The highway was soon converted into a helo-pad of sorts, as helicopters ferried the most seriously injured to Dallas hospitals.

Emotions running high

Unlike Harris County's large medical examiner facility, accident victims in Sherman are taken directly to funeral homes.

It was there that the bodies were kept for safekeeping and faces were photographed to help with identification.

Since many lost their identification cards in the accident, figuring out who the victims were started with family providing ages and general descriptions, including the clothes they were wearing.

The emotional scenes that unfolded tore at even some of the area's most experienced mortuary workers.

"It was very poignant, your heart goes out to people," said Pat Dannel of Dannel Funeral Home in Sherman. "Their families have come up from other areas to identify their parents or loved ones. It is heartbreaking."

Funerals are expected to be held this week. Masses honoring the victims began Saturday.

"This is very hard on us," said Betty Nguyen, who attended a Mass on Saturday evening in Houston for five parishioners of Vietnamese Martyrs Catholic Church who died in the crash. "But we're not about blaming people. We're about our faith."

Staff writers Dale Lezon and Jennifer Leahy contributed to this report from Houston.
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Obama_akbar_2012 wrote:

The driver, 52-year-old Barrett Broussard, had a commercial licence, but his medical certification expired in May, according to the NTSB. Broussard was stable at a hospital. Authorities took blood samples from Broussard on Friday but do not have the results, Hersman said. Broussard was convicted in 2001 of driving while intoxicated in Houston and sentenced to 10 days in prison and a \$225 fine, according to online records from the Texas Department of Public Safety. He has also been arrested at least three other times and was sentenced to two years in prison in 1998 for violating probation. http://canadianpress.google.com/article/ALeqM5jm0ELx91Z22oXVVyE_xh27w2sSlw

8/10/2008 10:12 PM CDT

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fenceSitter wrote:

Outside... no not just a tragic accident, but one waiting to happen, how often have you seen re-treads on the road, I know I have to dodge them, if they were using this POS on their steering wheels, then they are libel, if the driver has not had a physical in X amount of time, then they are libel, they are transporting people, not cattle, hay bales, if they had served the other way onto traffic then the accident would have been much worse. The owner of the company, the driver and perhaps the Church are all some what in this together, the owner for the condition of his driver/vehicle, for violating the law, for saying yes, he is allowed to go out of state, the driver for knowing his condition and the condition of his vehicle and the Church, what questions should they have asked, in hindsight, I am not sure what questions the Church should have asked, their is a certain amount of trust you place when you hire a legit business, if it is a cab, or an airline. I ASSUME that they are regulated and inspected by the respective agencies in charge of them. how as end users can we trust that the transportation system is working and being inspected. When I fly, I hope that the airline is following the latest FAA/NTSB/MFG laws and guidance, but if not, I may land or I may end up crashing. If the gov knew that this operation was poorly run, then, they should have gotten with the state and pulled their license, not just say, sorry, we only limit Interstate Commerce so.. you are not allowed out of state, but we will not inform Texas of our decision. I have travelled by train, airplane, buses, trailways and Greyhound, by boat, but taxi in many part of the world since I wa 6 months, generally I have felt safe, but since the great deregulation, while prices have gone for me to travel, at what price have I paid in unknown safety violations. In the helicopter world, there is a saying, any landing you walk away from is a good landing, is that to be on saying in transportation in general.

8/10/2008 8:38 PM CDT

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flipflop_mcclovn wrote:

Dumb republicans are scrambling around everywhere to try to deflect responsibility away from the dumb republicans who push tort reform and lax regulation of business. Perhaps we will find out that out of the "clients" of the Texas Department of Insurance, which is run by dumb republicans is insolvent and can't pay the claims because dumb republicans didn't want to regulate the bus industry. Or even worse, maybe we'll find out some dumb republican in the DPS didn't bother to check this man's insurance because we all know that dumb republicans would hate to ask a business owner a question without saying 'mother may I' and 'pretty please'/'Don't vote dumb, don't vote republican.

8/10/2008 6:59 PM CDT

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FlatTire wrote:

All this talk, and nobody has yet heard from the owner of the bus company. Ya think he's still in the country?

8/10/2008 6:53 PM CDT

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