

[Print This Article](#)

Tuesday, Aug 19, 2008
Posted on Fri, Aug 08, 2008

Bus was equipped with illegal recapped tire, NTSB says

By BILL MILLER, GORDON DICKSON and ANDREW CHAVEZ
Star-Telegram Staff Writers

SHERMAN — A motor coach that crashed early Friday in Sherman, killing at least 15 people, was equipped with an illegal recapped tire that blew out, investigators said.

Recapped tires are essentially old tires equipped with a new layer of rubber tread. They are legal, and commonly used on tractor-trailers, buses and other large vehicles. Federal rules allow recapped tires on passenger buses — but only on axles not involved in steering the vehicle.

However, the bus that crashed in Sherman had a recapped Goodyear tire on its right front axle, a violation of federal safety rules, National Transportation Safety Board member Debbie Hersman said.

"If there is a loss of air pressure, or delamination of the tire, it's much more difficult to control the vehicle," Hersman said during a news briefing at Dallas/Fort Worth Airport.

All nine other tires on the bus had their original tread, Hersman said. The left front tire was a Firestone.

NTSB officials say they're still investigating whether the blowout caused the crash. Survivors told police they thought the bus experienced a blown tire just before the driver lost control on U.S. 75. The bus struck a guardrail, and slid 180 feet before plunging 12 feet down an embankment and landing on its side.

The 52-year-old driver, whose name was not released, had a valid commercial driver license but an expired medical certificate, Hersman said.

Meanwhile, Sherman police said shortly before 7 p.m. that a 15th passenger involved in the crash has died at Wilson N. Jones Hospital in Sherman.

Police obtained the information from hospital officials, who said the deceased was a woman, but did not release her name or age.

So far, investigators have identified seven of the 15 people killed in the crash.

They continue to investigate why the tire blew and sent the bus careening off U.S. 75 on the way to a religious gathering in Missouri.

Officials must also determine why the bus was on an interstate trip. Federal officials had ordered the owner not to travel out of state because of several driver-related safety violations, federal and state records show.

In addition, the charter owner, Angel Tours of Houston, was operating illegally in Texas, the records show.

The bus ran through a guard rail about 12:45 a.m. Friday and crashed onto its side in a creek bed below.

Twelve of the 54 passengers were dead at the scene. One passenger died later Friday at John Peter Smith Hospital in Fort Worth, another at Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas and the third at Wilson N. Jones in Sherman. The surviving victims were taken to a half-dozen hospitals around North Texas.

"I can tell you there were very few walking wounded," Sherman Fire Chief J.J. Jones said. The injuries were "primarily crushing wounds," he said, although a small fire reportedly broke out after the crash.

The driver survived and was talking with investigators at an undisclosed hospital.

"I have four boys, ages 10 and under, and when I saw this, I thought 'My God,'" said Sherman Mayor Bill Magers. "But when you hear about (the dead), it just hits you."

"And those seats," he said, motioning to the wreckage, "they're just crushed."

All the passengers were Vietnamese, and investigators said a group of ministers connected with the group helped translate and identify victims.

Many, if not all, were members of the Vietnamese Martyr Catholic Church in Houston.

Greg Middents, justice of the peace for Precinct 1, estimated that the dead ranged in age from approximately 20 to the mid-60s.

"We went around to the bodies and the local police looked in the pockets for identification," Middents said. "If they had identification then that information was shared between me and the detectives."

Authorities hoped to identify the remaining bodies by comparing pictures supplied by family members, he said.

"There were two ministers that came up from Dallas so they're helping identifying and dealing with the families," Middents said. In addition, family members were on their way from Houston to help.

Angel Tours was deemed unsatisfactory and unfit for interstate travel June 23, according to the Federal Motor

Carrier Safety Administration, an arm of the U.S. Department of Transportation.

An "unsatisfactory" rating is issued if "records indicate evidence of substantial noncompliance with safety requirements," according to the agency. The company received the rating after a compliance review on May 1, according to the agency's Web site.

Investigators at the scene were not commenting about the company's status.

"We will look at every aspect of the accident," Ayers said, adding that the site would be treated as a crime scene. "... It's premature to jump out there and say exactly what may have happened."

At Parkland hospital, family members of victims were speaking with a hospital interpreter in an effort to determine which victims are at that hospital.

Another male victim arrived at Parkland by helicopter ambulance shortly before 10 a.m. and officials said he was in serious condition.

In Fort Worth, Whitney Jodry, spokeswoman with Harris Methodist Fort Worth hospital, said the hospital received one of the injured, who was listed in critical condition as of 11 a.m. She did not know the patient's gender.

Lt. Steve Ayers, head of the accident investigation team for the Sherman Police Department, said Vietnamese-speaking officers from the Dallas Police Department were available to assist. Lt. Vernon Hale, Dallas Police spokesman, said one officer was on his way to the scene.

Sixteen patients were taken to Wilson N. Jones Medical Center in Sherman, where five people were in critical condition, said Kitty Richardson, hospital spokeswoman.

Middents said two of those dead at the scene -- that of a man and woman -- were taken to the Dallas County medical examiner's office for autopsies. The remaining were taken to three funeral homes in Sherman.

Middents said he had no plans to order any additional autopsies on those who died at the scene.

"I don't think there's a need for that," he said. "Basically we generally know what happened -- massive blunt trauma. But just to cover the bases, we ordered two, one male and one female."

Middents said he arrived at the crash site about 2 a.m.

"The bodies were already outside the bus in body bags," he said. "It was still a horrible scene. You had bodies and medical personnel, police and ambulances. It was just a horrible scene."

By 9 a.m., the bus had been loaded onto a flatbed trailer that then pulled onto the access road. The windows were shorn away and seats were bent forward. An upper panel from the inside of the bus was crushed onto the seats.

Chunks of grass and dirt were embedded into the wheel wells and in various parts of the inside of the bus.

Trash bags filled with belongings were sitting on an access road nearby and scattered debris was still in the roadway. Tangled metal guardrails were beside the road.

One Sherman resident, who would only identify herself as Dorothy, went to the scene out of curiosity and stood nearby.

"It's just a great sorrow," she said. "It reminds you we need to keep praying. I'm praying right now as we speak."

The accident happened less than a mile from the spot where a trucker crossed the median and killed 10 people five years ago.

Sherman is about 65 miles north of Dallas.

Staff writers Deanna Boyd and Candace Carlisle.