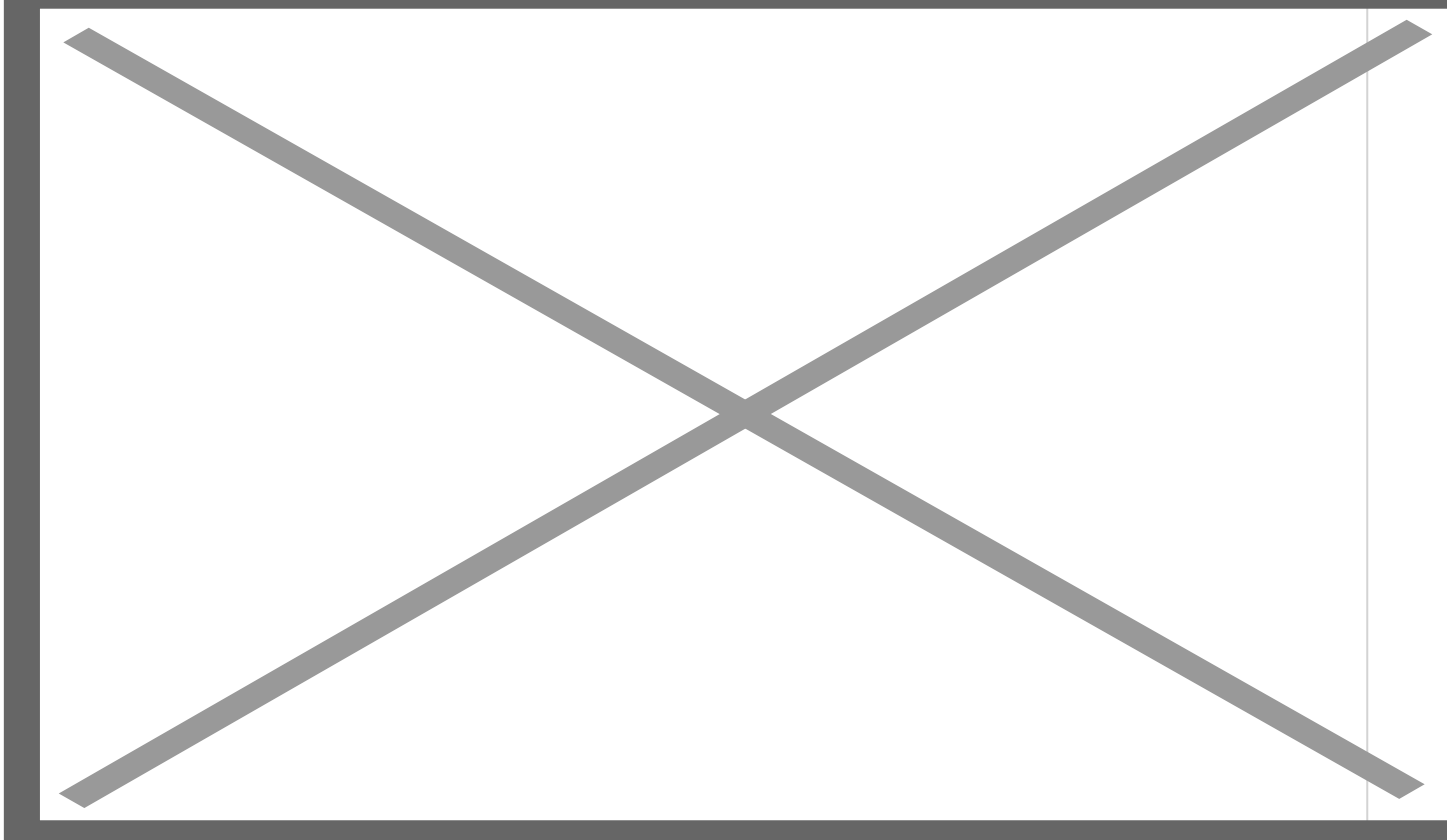


French rail network hit by coordinated attacks ahead of Paris Olympics

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Passengers at Gare du Nord station in Paris ahead of the Olympics opening ceremony [Yves Herman/Reuters]

Paris, July 26 (RHC)-- France's high-speed TGV rail network has been hit by "malicious acts", disrupting some of the nation's busiest lines on the day of the Paris Olympics opening ceremony. "Arson attacks were started to damage our facilities," said state-owned railway operator SNCF on Friday, adding that the "simultaneous malicious acts" had taken place overnight.

Transport Minister Patrice Vergriete called the “massive attack” against France’s high-speed TGV rail network an “outrageous criminal act”. He described people fleeing from the scene of fires and the discovery of incendiary devices at the site.

SNCF said many routes would have to be cancelled “at least all weekend while repairs are conducted”.

Arsonists had targeted installations along the lines connecting the capital, Paris, with the country’s west, north and east. The southeastern line was not affected as “a malicious act was foiled”, it said.

Trains to neighbouring Belgium and to London under the English Channel were also affected.

Valerie Pécresse, president of the regional council of the greater Paris region said “250,000 travellers will be affected today on all these lines.” She advised travellers “not to go to stations.”

The attack occurred against a backdrop of global tensions and heightened security measures as the city prepared for the opening ceremony of the 2024 Olympic Games on Friday, an event featuring 7,500 athletes, 300,000 spectators and an audience of VIPs.

“Security was always a concern at these Olympics and here you see why,” said Al Jazeera’s Bernard Smith. The apparently coordinated attacks were, he said, “a clear indication of the enormous security challenges France is facing”.

National police said authorities are investigating what happened. “It’s completely appalling,” Sports Minister Amélie Oudéa-Castera told BFMTV. “To target the games is to target France.”

“These Games are for the athletes who have been dreaming of them for years and fighting for the holy grail of standing on the podium – and someone’s sabotaging that for them,” she said.

More than 45,000 police officers, 10,000 soldiers and 2,000 private security agents were deployed, with snipers on rooftops and drones keeping watch from the air.

Reporting from Paris, Smith said “an unprecedented security operation” was in place. A large area along the Seine has been locked down for the ceremony, which will go along 6 km (3.7 miles) of the river and “watched by more than 100 global leaders from countries across the world”, he said.

It was not immediately clear whether the attacks were linked to the international sports event, but a source close to the investigation told the AFP news agency that the attacks were acts of “sabotage”.

The attacks were “evidently coordinated”, the source said. Al Jazeera’s Smith highlighted the tense geopolitical backdrop against which the games are taking place, with Israel continuing its bombing campaign in Gaza and Russia making territorial gains in Ukraine.

French President Emmanuel Macron had called for an “Olympic Truce” during a meeting with Chinese leader Xi Jinping and at the United Nations General Assembly in December.

Given the wars in Gaza and Ukraine, there was not much hope for such a truce, said Smith. On the contrary, the event had attracted accusations of double standards given that Israel was allowed to take part, with 88 athletes.

“The Palestinian Olympic committee called for Israel to be blocked ... because of the war in Gaza, but those calls have fallen on deaf ears,” he said. SNCF urged passengers to postpone their trips and stay away from train stations. Many French families are also heading on summer vacation this weekend.

SNCF chief executive Jean-Pierre Farandou said 800,000 passengers were affected.

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