Engineer at Center of Train Derailment Speaks Out

LAC-MEGANTIC, Quebec (AP) — The engineer who parked the oil train that rolled away, derailed and exploded in the center of a Quebec town was heard from Tuesday for the first time since the July 6 disaster that killed 50 people, with his lawyer saying he is "devastated."

Work continues Tuesday, July 16, 2013, at the crash site of the train derailment and fire in Lac-Megantic, Quebec. The derailment July 6, 2013, left 37 people confirmed dead and another 13 missing and presumed dead. **(AP Photo/The Canadian Press, Ryan Remiorz)**

Journalists, meanwhile, were allowed their first close-up view of the disaster, where misshapen, blackened oil tankers were still steaming from the intense heat that has slowed the recovery of bodies.

Lawyer Thomas Walsh said Tom Harding needs time to recover from the shock. Walsh said he hopes to get psychological help for his client, who has been staying at an undisclosed location to stay away from the media.

"I used the word 'devastated,' and I think that's one word that's applicable, but he's very, very low," Walsh said.

Harding had not spoken publicly since the Montreal, Maine & Atlantic Railway train hurtled down a seven-mile (11-kilometer) incline, derailed and ignited in Lac-Megantic, near the Maine border. All but one of its 73 cars was carrying oil, and at least five exploded.

The crash, the worst railway accident in Canada in nearly 150 years, has raised

questions about the growing use of rail to transport oil in North America.

Harding had left the train unattended overnight to sleep at a local inn shortly before it barreled into town, devastating the downtown bar area and forcing a third of the 6,000 residents to flee. Officials said Tuesday that another body had been recovered, for a total of 38, and 12 have not been identified. The search continued for 12 bodies amid hazardous conditions.

A local cabbie who picked up Harding from work the night of the accident said the idling train was expelling more smoke than usual. He remembered seeing oil droplets landing on his car and asking Harding twice about it. He said Harding responded that he'd followed the proper procedures before he retired to the inn.

An inn employee said the engineer had a look of terror on his face as he bolted from his room after hearing the explosion.

Edward Burkhardt, president and CEO of the railway's U.S.-based parent company, Rail World Inc., has singled out the engineer as culpable. Burkhardt questioned whether he had properly set enough hand brakes and said the engineer had been suspended without pay.

Walsh said he would advise Harding not to make any kind of public statement about the disaster or the allegations of his culpability.

"I think we're better to let the dust settle and find out the specifics from the investigators — maybe if there are some specifics, he might want to respond to them," the lawyer said.

He said Harding has been co-operating with officials.

"He was interviewed for a long period of time by the Surete du Quebec (Quebec police) and by the safety investigators from Transport Canada last week," Walsh said.

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