

Driver faces court over death crash

THE driver of a train in which 43 people were killed in France's third rail crash in under two months appears before a magistrate today as a row developed over the safety of the country's rail network.

Eighty-six people were injured in the crash early yesterday, 30 seriously, and officials fear the death toll may rise.

The driver has admitted that the train was travelling at three times the permitted speed before it crashed at Argenton-sur-Creuse, north of Limoges.

Thirteen of the train's 14 coaches were derailed on a curve where engineering works were in progress.

Moments later a six-coach mail train slammed into them, cutting one coach completely in two lengthwise.

Firemen said the impact was so powerful that one compartment, normally 2m, was crushed to 50cm of solid steel.

The safety row developed between unions and the Socialist Government in reaction to the crash.

Officials of SNCF, the State-owned railway company, blamed the passenger train driver for the crash.

SNCF's regional director, Andre Guicharneau, said driver Jean-Yves Brisset was travelling at 100km/h in a zone where speed was restricted to 30km/h because of repairs.

Justice officials said Brisset, 37, was remanded in custody to appear before a magistrate today in Chateauroux and was expected to be charged with manslaughter.

Transport Secretary Jean Auroux, who visited the tangled mess of blood-spattered wreckage, said the Government wanted a precise SNCF report on safety.

But SNCF unions said job cuts were a major reason for less safety in the railway system and warned against using employees as scapegoats in the disaster.

The crash, just after midnight and 300km south of Paris, was the worst since 1972 when 108 people were killed in a mid-tunnel collision in northern France.

It followed a smash in Normandy which killed eight on July 8 and a head-on collision on August 3 when 33 died.

Local public prosecutor Andre Lubes said blood tests showed Brisset was not under the influence of alcohol at the time of the crash.

He said Brisset had admitted his train was travelling too fast.

Nine killed in pile-up

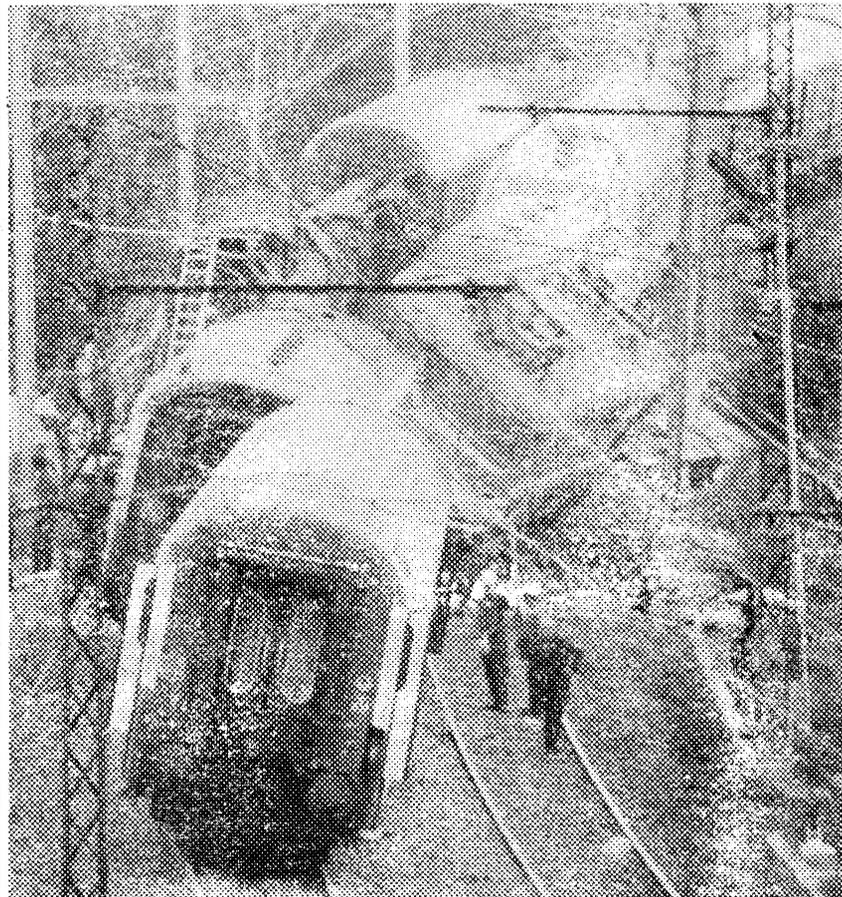
POLICE say smoke from a burning-off operation caused a massive pile-up on a highway in France in which nine people were killed and 11 injured.

Three trucks and nine cars collided on the smoke-filled strip of road near the city of Orleans.

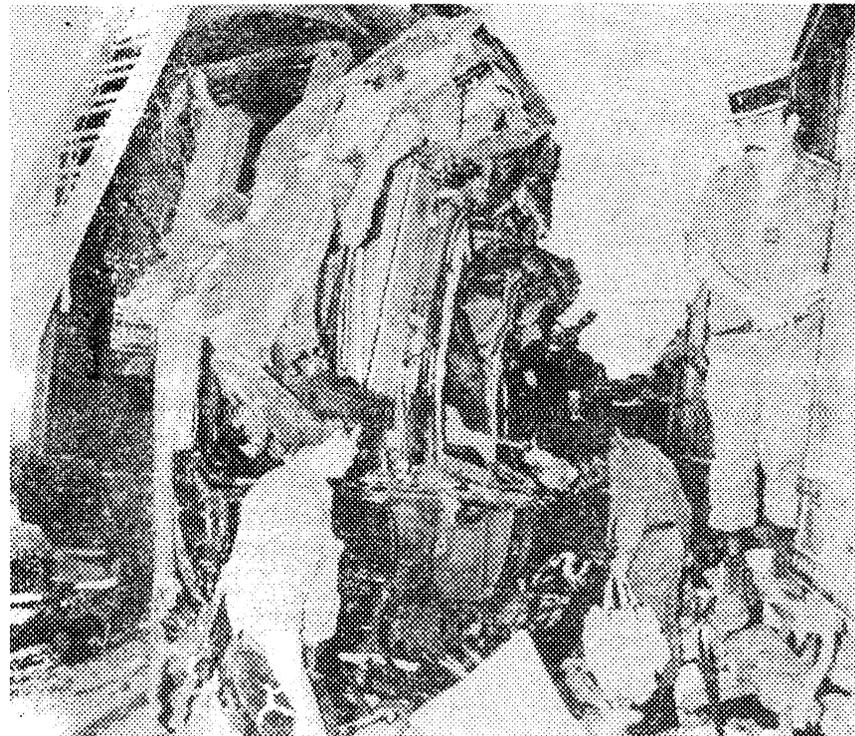
A car and a truck first collided, catching fire, and the other vehicles piled up behind after a curtain of smoke suddenly blinded drivers on the highway.

Seven people died in the fire and others were seriously burned. Two died in the collision.

Two helicopters helped evacuate the injured to hospitals.



The death scene . . . a mass of smashed and derailed carriages



Close up graphically demonstrates the force of impact