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ROCK FALL CLOSES THE GOTTHARD

We take an overview of the incident and its long-term implications...

The scene of the Gotthard rock fall. Photo: Roy Marriott

At shortly after 09.00 on Tuesday June 5, there was a massive rock fall on the western side of the Reuss valley south of Gurtellen, and below the Wassen tunnels, that blocked the north ramp of the Gotthard main line. There had been a rock fall close to this point in March, resulting in a 5 day closure whilst it was cleared, and additional blasting, measurements, etc., were undertaken. The cliff is known to be unstable, but there had not been any warning to suggest a further fall of some tens of thousands of tonnes of rock just 100m away. Most of it fell short of the railway, but some caused severe damage and indicated the potential for more to fall in the future. Three workpeople were caught by the fall. Sadly one died whilst two received serious injuries. Mercifully there was no train in the double track section at the time, and the alarm was given by the destruction of the catenary and the signalling circuits. On the 6th June SBB announced that the line would be closed for at least a month to enable stabilisation of the cliff face to be undertaken. This work involved the removal of more unstable rock and a large section of the cliff was blasted away on the 18th June (shown live on Swiss TV), with the parallel Autobahn also having to be closed as a precautionary measure. The Gotthard line finally reopened on the 2nd July.

The closure had a severe communications impact, since there is no other direct rail route into the Ticino from the north. Southbound through passenger trains were being terminated at Arth-Goldau and Flüelen with passengers carried by bus between Flüelen and Göschenen where the rail journey recommenced. Northbound services operated in reverse. However the S1 local service operated to its normal

terminus in Erstfeld. Passengers between Zürich, Basel and Italy (there are still quite a lot despite the Pendolino problems) were advised to use the Simplon route which most do anyway. As many freight trains as possible were redirected through the Lötschberg and Simplon tunnels. This route leads to the west of Milano, whereas a lot of trains need the Chiasso connection. A big obstacle was the major on-going track maintenance work between Domodossola and the Simplon tunnel, plus the fact the Lötschberg Base Tunnel was already operating near full capacity, resulting in freight trains having to use the old route via Kandersteg. Due to a short-sighted political decision the Base Tunnel is not double-tracked for the whole of its length. This was proving to be a costly error even before this incident. Other routes used for long-range diversions of piggyback and container trains, were the Austrian Brenner Pass and the French Mont Cenis tunnel, though both were themselves restricted by rebuilding. HUPAC, SBB, BLS, normally fierce competitors, installed a master plan to optimise capacity together. It wasn't enough, but it worked well.

Although the rock fall above Gurtellen was a serious incident for the SBB it also impacted directly on Swiss economic, political and transport priorities, opening a much wider debate, especially if maintaining the safety of the line is seen to be a long term liability. The SBB has an obligation to contribute to national coherence. In this case Canton Ticino expects a national equality of treatment. This partly explains the elaborate measures taken to maintain the Lugano and Locarno services to the north during the failure of the Pendolino services, which should have provided these as part

of their international schedules on this direct rail route. There is also the highway, but the old road over the Pass is only open from June to October, while the Autobahn, with its 13 km tunnel opened in 1980, is heavily congested at peak times. For Swiss politicians, not to mention the vociferous truckers, maintaining a viable link with Ticino is more important than the Italian transit traffic. Also, the Ticino depends heavily on tourism and this today is predominantly road-based. The complication goes further. In the next few years, the Gotthard autobahn tunnel, only a single-bore two-lane section in the middle of a normal four-lane autobahn, needs serious overhaul perhaps involving closure for a year or more. Debate is raging between those who say that this is the time to build a second autobahn tunnel and finally remove the bottleneck (queues normally only occur at peak holiday periods as the average annual daily vehicle total is just 17,000 vehicles, and 20,000 vehicles per day is the usual upgrade threshold) and those who insist that that would destroy 30 years of trying to hold back international road freight. The Federal Government spends large sums on subsidizing piggyback and rolling highway trains to meet legal commitments for transferring highway freight to rail as well as building the new high-speed-rail Gotthard Base Tunnel due to open in 2016. A part of the financial justification of this was that rail traffic will increase and that the Gotthard autobahn, built with long forgotten promises that it was not for freight but for private cars, will not then demand further heavy investment. Moreover, the base tunnel, being longer, will not be exposed to the recurring risks of the mountain section. The immediate problem therefore should go away. However, regarding the long-term, politicians, ecologists and economists are divided, as are local people both sides of the Gotthard. The Pendolino scandal has seriously damaged the rail passenger business, and rail freight users may also lose confidence if the existing railway is seen as unsafe/unreliable, whilst inevitable road traffic growth cannot be handled on the existing highway. The Ticino economy is fragile, with many jobs today indirectly dependent on subsidized rail haulage, being at risk if rail cargo has to go through France or Austria to Italy. The fear that short-term solutions will destroy long-term ambitions is real. There is, in all, a big flock of troubles coming home to roost following the rock fall.

...and Richard Hawkins relates one traveller's tale


“Replacement bus service” is three words that are certain to strike fear into the heart of any rail traveller. However, even knowing that the Gotthard line was blocked, my wife and I decided to travel from Luzern to Lugano for the day. We boarded the 08:20 from Luzern seated ourselves in its Panorama Car as far as Fluelen. On arrival there, and despite the sea of fluorescent vests, a certain amount of confusion reigned. The station car park was full of buses and coaches of all descriptions and despite being one of the first off the train and into the car park. We, along with most other First Class passengers, were shepherded onto a rural bus which was first in the line. Once the bus was full, other passengers were directed to luxury coaches located behind the bus, which then



TV Crews at the rock fall.

Photo: Roy Marriott.

left before we did. We eventually discovered the reason for our delay – the arrival of a passenger in a wheelchair that only this bus could accommodate. We eventually set off down the A2 motorway to Göschenen, passing the site of the rock fall at Gurtellen as we did so. On arrival, passengers were directed across the tracks via the barrow crossing, presumably in order to avoid dragging luggage through the subway as normal, onto a waiting ICN unit that departed briskly for Lugano and Chiasso. On our return that afternoon the arrangements were generally reversed, with the slight difference that the waiting train at Fluelen was a S3 stopping service to Luzern. This train would normally have started at Brunnen but the service had been extended to accommodate passengers from the bus transfer. Passengers bound for Zürich and Basel were requested to change at Art Goldau for their connections.

Interestingly, despite the anticipated one month duration for these replacement travel arrangements, no alterations had been made to the regular pre-recorded train information at stations. For example at Luzern the Ticino services were all announced as if the trains were running normally. The arrangements for transfer to buses were left to the train conductors to announce once the trains had commenced their journeys. It was similar on the ships on Lake Luzern; passengers travelling on the “Wilhelm Tell Express” to Fluelen appeared to only discover the need for bus transfer when the ship arrived there. A fellow traveller on our train service was heading to Milan from London and had been given no warning of the bus transfer prior to, or during, the journey. 

This article was compiled from input from Bryan Stone, Michael Donovan, Tony Bagwell, Roy Marriott, Richard Hawkins and other members.