

《英语新闻评论：各地公车着火揭露设计故障》

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In less than 10 days, a third bus fire erupted on Tuesday evening in Guangzhou, capital of Guangdong province. The explosion happened as passengers were getting off the crowded No 301 bus. The flames spread very fast and just within five minutes the fire engulfed the whole bus. Up to now at least two people died and 32 were injured.

The latest series of bus fires cast a big shadow on China's public transit safety, which is a big concern of ordinary Chinese. It's high time for related authorities to take long- and short-time measures to improve bus designs to ensure safety.

Before the Guangzhou bus fire, a suspect tried to set a bus on fire in Changsha in Hunan last Friday, but fortunately he was stopped in time. But the bus fire in Hangzhou in Zhejiang province on July 5 left 32 passengers severely burned and injured.

Such sporadic and unexpected bus fire accidents have created shock waves among the bus passengers, because the fires are so close to their ordinary life. For many people the buses are their only choice to commute. For instance, in Beijing, the number of bus trips made by passengers can reach more than 20 million on a single day, and the number in Guangzhou on average reaches more than 7 million.

In fact, after two similar extreme cases in Chengdu in 2009 and in Xiamen last year, which claimed dozens of lives and injured more, bus drivers, passengers, and even passersby have raised the sense of safety and act much faster compared with the two previous shocking fires. It's an important reason why in the latest three accidents, the numbers of casualties are smaller.

In the Hangzhou case, many people working nearby rushed to break the windows with different tools and helped to put out the fire with their own extinguishers. However, in the accident Tuesday night, people nearby tried to join in the rescue but failed in getting close to the bus because the fire was too large and spread too fast.

It's an urgent task for the related authorities to get rid of the design faults as exposed in the series of bus fires.

After the fires, evacuation guidelines became popular, teaching people how to open the door and break the window with hammers, which calls for training and skills. However, the training, even if it is introduced in future, is far from enough to save passengers.

Just like in the case with the Guangzhou bus fire yesterday, the fire engulfed the whole bus in just five minutes. For any passengers it will not be an easy task to break the window in minutes, not to mention when they are in a panic. There were about 40 passengers on aboard when bus was on fire last night, and "several were not able to get off".

In the long run, the authorities must improve designs to raise safety standards. All the windows should be open with a single button rather than continuous hitting. The interior materials should pass flame tests to slow a fire once

it happens.

It is impractical for local governments to invest such a huge fund to overhaul all the buses over night. However, they need to introduce buses with news designs, step by step. As the economy slows, the investment in public transit safety can be included in the mini-stimulus, which can not only boost local economic growth but also improve public safety.

In the short term, the buses can be urgently equipped with automatic fire suppression systems or alarms, at least to minimize the losses once fires erupt. Simple safety check facilities can be set up at the bus doors, if it's affordable in some relatively developed regions.

The series of bus fires have already alarmed people about public transit safety. The authorities should act now to protect people's lives.

