23 Injured After Toronto Bus Overturns on New Jersey Interstate

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Please pray for the injured and their families.


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PATERSON, N.J.—It was the home stretch of a gruelling overnight bus trip from Toronto, and as the sun rose over New Jersey’s Interstate 80, the charter carrying 57 people was not far from its New York destination.

Some passengers were excitedly on their way to a religious celebration — 23 from the Grenada Toronto Community Network were en route to a Seventh-day Adventist event in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Others, like Leon Downer’s long-time friend, were returning from a trip to Toronto and looking forward to arriving home.

But as Brampton bus driver Neville Larmond, 51, entered a stretch of New Jersey highway known locally as “the spaghetti bowl” for its crisscrossing exits and entrances, he lost control. At 7:40 a.m., the bus flew off the road.

Piercing bangs. Shattered glass. Passengers flying from one side of the bus to another. Chaos.

The bus careened across grass, flipped onto its side and came to a stop at Exit 53 in Wayne, N.J.

“It was so sudden,” said Deanne Joseph. “I was sitting on the fifth row on the left side when it went around the corner and just lost control.”

Downer said his friend heard “bang and held on to the rails for her life. There were people falling all over.”

Fire, police and EMS officials arrived to find 23 people injured, eight critically. Three were pinned under the bus, trapped under passenger seats and window frames.

The injured, including two children and some adults wearing neck braces, were rushed to surrounding hospitals. A young man with a leg injury has already been treated, but his wife is in critical condition. Two other women, including Joseph’s close relative, have had their cuts and bruises stitched. It’s not known if they have any broken bones.

The eight critically injured were sent to St. Joseph's Regional Medical Center in Paterson.

As night fell on that New Jersey town, Downer paced and waited for his friend, who he was supposed to pick up from his hometown of Brooklyn. The woman, who he did not name, was shaken up but not badly hurt, he said.

“She arrived wearing a neck brace and she’s awaiting an MRI. We’re hoping she can get out tonight.”

The bus landed in a soft marshy stretch of land, said Robert Cuomo of the New Jersey State Police. Had the vehicle hit concrete, “it would have been more serious, or fatal.”

Many turned to prayer shortly after, recognizing, too, that the crash could have been more severe.

“A lot of people were praying, some people were crying. We were thanking God because we didn’t have anybody who died on the bus today,” a passenger named Simone told local news station WABC. “We were giving God thanks for all the lives He saved today.”

New Jersey State Police Sgt. Adam Grossman said the accident was under investigation. The bus is owned by GTA company AVM Max 2000 Charter Services Inc.
A man who answered the phone at AVM Max 2000 Saturday afternoon said he had spoken to the driver from the hospital, but offered no details about the crash.

A company listed as AYM MAX 2000, but with the same Toronto address as AVM Max 2000, is named on a federal Department of Transportation website as “not allowed to operate” in the U.S., NJ.com reported.

According to the transportation department, AYM MAX 2000 has received five safety violations since April 2011. Last May, the company was cited for using a fatigued driver, according to the U.S. website.

Passenger Cyprian Craigwelt, 50, told NorthJersey.com passengers were not wearing seatbelts, causing some from the right side of the bus to fall on top of others on the left.

Downer said his friend reported that Larmond was communicating the bus’s impending arrival to the Brooklyn station, using some type of radio. That has not been confirmed by police.

Parishioners at Toronto Central Seventh-day Adventist Church, which 12 of the passengers regularly attend, said prayers for the injured on Saturday afternoon. Like all Adventists, the church, which has a large congregation that draws people from across the Caribbean, holds weekly services on Saturday.

"Everything right now is what we’re hearing from other people,” said the church’s pastor, Andrew King. "We don’t want to (comment) until everything is definitive and we know exactly what’s happened and the physical state of each and every person that’s out there.”

Those who were unhurt were put on another bus and continued their journey to the 2012 Grenada New York Adventist Organization convention in Brooklyn.

"We were very sad because these people were coming to be part of the function today,” said Crafton Calliste, president of the Grenada New York Adventist Organization. "Then we heard about the crash. Mentally it was a strain on us because we were constantly thinking about them and the unfortunate situation that happened to them.”

Calliste said the organization paused the program to inform the audience of the accident. Attendees then prayed for those on the bus.

The bus passengers departed Toronto Friday night and planned to participate in the convention held at Wingate High School in Brooklyn until Monday.

"Every year we come together as Grenadians to help our country,” said Grenada Toronto Community Network member Layne Chitan, who was already at the event when the news broke.

"It’s so unfortunate that we’re coming to serve our people and this is what happens.”

Joseph is staying positive. “God lets things happen for whatever learning reason and here we are.”

*With files from The Associated Press, The Canadian Press, Theresa Boyle, Sarah Taguiam, Alex Nino Gheciu and Marco Oved*