



God given job with Indian railways

From correspondents in New Dehli

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INDIA'S railways minister has absolved himself of blame for accidents plaguing the world's largest train network, saying the fate of its 13 million daily passengers rested with the Hindu god of machines, Vishwakarma.

"Indian Railways is the responsibility of Lord Vishwakarma," Laloo Prasad Yadav said, as quoted Friday by *The Times of India* newspaper.

"So is the safety of passengers. It is his duty (to ensure safety), not mine. I have been forced to don his mantle," the mercurial minister said on a visit to his hometown of Patna in eastern India.

Yadav's statement came less than a month after 20 people were killed and around 100 injured when a passenger train plunged off a bridge in western India after hitting a boulder.

India's railway system, which stretches 108,700km across the nation of more than a billion people, sees accidents large or small nearly every day owing in part to badly outdated infrastructure.

The rail system is saddled by a 1.6 million-strong workforce, making it the world's largest single non-military employer.

Industry analysts criticise the government for introducing new trains every year without investing in the system's upkeep. Raising railway fares is a major political liability in India.

Yadav, a veteran low-caste activist, is known for his outlandish statements but enjoys wide support among Bihar's peasants and is a top coalition partner of the left-leaning government which took office May 22.

He recently began signing letters as Lalu Prasad, dropping his surname, reportedly after consultation with astrologers.

Agence France-Presse

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