

PM denies rail-safety warnings ignored

NDP grills Harper on Lac-Mégantic

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Prime Minister Stephen Harper said some rules were broken in the Lac-Mégantic runaway train disaster, but he rejected opposition accusations Thursday that his government had ignored warning signs that led to the fatal tragedy.

Pressed by NDP Leader Tom Mulcair over written warnings from the small Quebec town to the government in 2012 over apparent deterioration of the railway tracks, Harper noted that the government had invested money in recent years to improve inspections.

"There is obviously an inquiry into this incident," Harper said in the House of Commons. "It would be premature to suggest, as the leader of the NDP does, that he knows all of the facts. However, I think that the facts that we do know indicate pretty clearly that rules were not abided by."

Mulcair suggested that the city wouldn't be needing new money right now for reconstruction if the federal government had addressed its concerns in the first place. "In 2012, the city even wrote to the transport minister and to the (local Conservative) MP, the minister responsible for the region," he said. "Despite that, the Conservative government ignored the warnings."

A series of audits and reports have criticized the government's oversight of railway safety as well as its oversight of the transportation of dangerous goods. This includes a report released last week by the auditor general that found "significant weaknesses" in oversight, including inadequate inspections, poor training for inspectors, weak oversight from management and sloppy record-keeping.

Transport Minister Lisa Raitt responded to the report last week by telling senior officials in her department that the public expected them to make drastic improvements.