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Tower collapse that halted trains may be sabotage

(The following article by Robert Herguth was posted on the Chicago Sun-Times website on October 11.)

CHICAGO -- Authorities suspect sabotage was behind the collapse of two enormous electrical transmission towers in Wisconsin that halted Amtrak train service between Chicago and Milwaukee for much of the weekend.

That service should be normal today -- but investigators will be back to search for clues.

An FBI anti-terrorism task force is working with the Oak Creek (Wis.) Police Department in getting to the bottom of Saturday's tumbling of the two towers.

Nobody was hurt, but freight and passenger train service was halted until Sunday evening while crews cleared the power lines from the tracks -- the towers landed nearby -- and authorities collected physical evidence.

"At first we were hoping it was an accidental metal failure, but it's apparent one of the towers was tampered with: Bolts were removed from the plate that connects the legs to the base," said Thomas Bauer, police chief of the suburban Milwaukee community.

"We did locate physical evidence at the scene," Bauer said. "We'll return [today] where we'll continue to identify and collect evidence."

A freight train stopped 75 yards short of the wires Saturday and then sat there for more than 24 hours.

Airport loses power

The Hiawatha service between Chicago and Milwaukee was scuttled during that time, and shuttle buses were enlisted. Amtrak's Empire Builder also had to be adjusted, railroad officials said.

Milwaukee's Mitchell Airport, which is about a mile from where the nearly 50-year-old towers tipped, lost power for a while over the weekend.

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The incident occurred just after U.S. Sen. John Edwards, the Democratic vice presidential nominee, landed at Mitchell.

"Who's to say if there's any connection?" said airport spokeswoman Pat Rowe.

The area where the apparent tampering happened was described by Bauer as "industrial and somewhat isolated."

An FBI official confirmed the agency's involvement in the investigation but gave no further details.

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