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## Fatal bus crash doesn't sway travelers, but they're told to be cautious

By David Ellison, Houston Chronicle

Jan. 5--With luggage on the ground, Francisco Schwartau and his 82-year-old mother, Bertha, braved the cold temperatures Friday as they awaited a bus bound to Mexico City.

A fatal crash of a bus headed to Houston from Monterrey, Mexico, on Wednesday didn't cause them to fear the service the mother has been using for a decade.

"Yes," Francisco Schwartau said Friday at a gas station parking lot, "they are very safe. If not, I wouldn't let my mother go."

The crash in Victoria that killed one and injured dozens didn't involve the small company that Bertha Schwartau used for her trip. Still, the crash renewed concerns about safety of the drivers and vehicles used by smaller companies that transport people to Mexico.

**"The most important thing consumers should remember is: buyers should always beware of bargain buses because if they are offering cut-rate prices, they are cutting corners on safety," said Eron Shosteck, a spokesman for the Washington-based American Bus Association, a trade association representing motorcoach and tour companies.**

The bus involved in Wednesday's crash is owned by Capricorn Bus Lines. Authorities have said they suspect the driver, Roberto Garcia Cruz, 42, of Houston, may have dozed off behind the wheel.

Capricorn does not have the legal authority to drive its buses to Mexico, but it sells tickets by leasing its buses to another operator, International Charter Service Inc. of Houston.

Safety inspection records obtained by the Houston Chronicle show that ICS -- as an operator -- has had buses it leases cited at least 19 times since 2005. The citations include mechanical failure, lack of U.S. registration and incomplete log books kept by drivers.

Consumers, too, can find some information about bus companies on the Web sites of the Texas and U.S. transportation departments. Potential travelers can check on the

companies' insurance, vehicles, accidents, state and federal registrations and safety records.

"We encourage people to look at our site if they are going to haul household goods or hire a bus company," said Robert Anderson, an investigator with the Texas Department of Transportation.

TxDOT has information on all commercial vehicles registered in the state. All commercial vehicles that travel across state lines must register with the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Duane DeBruyne, a spokesman with the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, said the Web site helps groups select the appropriate vehicles for a chartered trip, find carriers in their areas and examine safety records.

Mark Werbner, a Dallas lawyer who has represented plaintiffs involved in bus crashes, said doing such research is unusual for groups that frequently arrange bus trips as well as individual consumers.

"It's so hard for the consumer to know which companies are safe," Werbner said. "It's taken as a matter of trust that you get on a bus that's been repaired and inspected and the drivers are trained."