

More than 300 dead in Indonesian shipping disaster

Keith Morgan
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Just over a week after the cargo ship *Artha Rimba* (Health of the Forest) sank on February 6 in the South China Sea, hopes of finding any of the 305 missing passengers is remote. Only 20 people, including the captain, have been rescued, after floating at sea for up to four days. Most of the passengers were workers from West Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo) lured on board with the promise of jobs in Sumatra.

The *Artha Rimba* went down approximately 40 kilometres from the island of Tambelan, part of the Indonesian province of Riau in Sumatra. It was an unseaworthy wooden vessel just over 30 metres in length and licensed to carry a captain, seven crew and a cargo of timber--not passengers.

According to the captain Hermanto, who remains hospitalised and under police guard in Kalimantan, the hull sprang a leak 17 hours after leaving port. The crowded vessel went down after the engine, bilge pumps and radio all broke down. Hermanto claimed that he distributed 200 life jackets and told the rest of the passengers to cling to blocks of wood. Panicked passengers and crew struggled to build makeshift rafts as water gushed into the engine room.

The captain claims that the weather had turned bad and the seas were heavy. However, one survivor, Suberman, a 23-year-old labourer, said: "The weather was fine when the accident happened. All I know is that there was a leak in the ship and it started taking water just around midnight on Saturday."

Hermanto has admitted to falsifying his manifest, claiming only he and the crew were aboard the boat. Information provided from the harbourmaster's office in Kalimantan reveals the sailing permit mentioned no passengers and falsified the date of departure. The workers, mainly to be employed by logging companies, boarded the vessel in a small village at the Sambas

Besar river, in the district of Sekura.

The captain said he did not know if the boat had been chartered--he was under instructions to transport the workers for a group headed by Salim, a policeman from Riau. According to the list supplied by Salim, there were 325 passengers, but the actual figure could have been higher as they were packed on board as tightly as possible.

Such practices appear to be common. The Indonesian *Kompas* newspaper reported on February 11: "A motor vessel, MV Kanada II was caught Sunday by the harbourmaster of Sungai Apit, the Regency of Bengkalis, Riau, because it was transporting 441 passengers. They were crowded in the ship's hold, which was opened and given partitions with bamboo... Upon checking it proved that in the sailing documents it was stated that the ship was empty."

The latest sinking highlights the conditions facing Indonesian workers, who are desperate either to find jobs or hang on to existing jobs, particularly as unemployment has risen sharply over the last year. With little supervision from local authorities, shipping agents, working in league with timber or plantation companies, load workers onto unseaworthy ships like so much timber or agricultural produce.

If an official inquiry is held at all, it will not delve into this trade in human cargo. The captain and a few underlings will no doubt be found responsible and it will be business as usual.

The seas around Indonesia are treacherous, even to the licensed vessels and ferries that working people are compelled to use to travel within the extensive island chain. Last July, about 60 people were killed when a ferry capsized in the Alas Straits between the islands of Sumbawa and Lombok. In November, at least 50 people died when a ferry sank off Sulewesi island after

developing engine trouble.

The latest sinking is Indonesia's worst maritime disaster since February 1996 when 338 people died after a ferry sank off the coast of Sumatra. In 1981, more than 600 people drowned when a passenger ferry sank off the island of Java.



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