

Over 280 dead in Chinese ferry disaster

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On Wednesday, November 24 a ferry carrying more than 300 people caught fire and capsized in raging seas off the northeast coast of China. Only 22 people survived what is one of the worst shipping disasters in China's recent history.

The 9,000-ton Dashun ferry, owned by the Yanda Car Ferry Company, left the port city of Yantai in Shandong province at 1pm for what is normally a seven to eight-hour journey to the northeastern port of Dalian, some 160 kilometres across the mouth of Bohai Bay.

It was forced to turn back because of extreme conditions. A level 10 typhoon created huge waves that pounded and rocked the ferry. Some 20 miles out from port a fire was discovered on the lower vehicle deck, which was loaded with up to 60 cars. Distress signals were sent out at approximately 4:30pm.

Crew members have stated that the fire was caused when one of the cars shifted and crashed into either another vehicle, an oil tank or the ferry's engines. The ship's second officer, interviewed on state television, claimed that by the time the crew reached the fire, it was out of control and hand-held fire extinguishers had no effect. Eventually the engines seized and the burning ferry was stranded in freezing winds and huge seas.

Official reports state that at approximately 11:50pm the ferry capsized and sank. A rescue official also stated that equipment controlling the release of life preservers and lifeboats failed to work as the ferry started to go down.

A tugboat was dispatched to rescue the Dashun passengers and crew 10 minutes after the Yantai Salvage Bureau received the distress calls. Despite the early reply, the tugboat was unable to carry out a successful rescue because of the horrific conditions.

Tugboat officer Lin Zhixiu told the *South China Morning Post*: "We spent three hours just trying to get close to the boat, but the waves were too large. The closest we got was 10 metres, but we still couldn't

connect with the boat, even with the aid of a rope gun. I have never seen such heavy waves in my past 20 years at sea".

A terrible tragedy unfolded for those on board. In the dark of night, with nowhere to run or shelter from the smoke and fumes on board, many people decided to jump into the raging waters as the ferry began sinking. Around 20 to 30 people jumped ship to try and reach life buoys that the rescue vessel had thrown into the sea, but only one person was pulled to safety.

Other passengers who were able to get into life rafts were swept into the freezing sea by the waves and drowned or died from exposure.

One survivor, a 28-year-old man, recounted the situation, "I decided to jump into the water because the smoke was so strong it was hard to breathe". Five others followed him into the sea, but he lost sight of them. After swimming for an hour he made it to the shore. Shen Xisheng, a survivor who witnessed what happened, said: "It breaks my heart to talk about this. All those people jumping to their deaths into the water".

Xu Zhichao survived by clinging to a life raft for four hours before being washed ashore. Another man said he smashed a cabin window when the ferry was sinking and then swam to the surface. He was rescued by a navy vessel that had arrived on the scene.

The next day rescuers found corpses washed up along the shoreline, as well as a few survivors who were unconscious and barely alive. The government mobilised up to 10,000 local villagers and army personnel to help search for more survivors and recover bodies. Grieving family members have insisted that the government continue the search until all those missing are found. Divers have recovered 55 bodies from inside the shipwreck.

The government has remained tight-lipped about the tragedy, demanding that any state media reporting not

be sensationalised. In large part this is due to the fact that the disaster was the second in just five weeks in which a ferry owned by Yanda had caught fire at sea and sunk. The first incident took place on October 17 when a ferry with 161 passengers and crew went down near Dalian. Three people lost their lives.

From the accounts of the latest tragedy it would appear that no safety audit had been carried out of the company's fleet or safety standards reconsidered in light of the previous accident. Vehicles were carried close to fuel or engines but were not secured adequately for turbulent conditions. Fire-fighting equipment was inadequate and mechanisms controlling the release of the life rafts failed.

Serious questions also arise as to why the vessel was sent out in such ferocious weather.

Everything points to indifference on the part of both the company and the state authorities toward basic issues of safety. Yet the Yantai-to-Dalian shipping route is a major link between east and northeast China, travelled by some 3.5 million people and 200,000 vehicles every year.

On November 26, the managers of Yanda Car Ferry Company were taken in for questioning by police but there are no reports of arrests or charges. However, one senses that the state authorities will single out one or another company manager to conceal their own role in the Dashun ferry tragedy.

The central government has belatedly announced that a nation-wide workplace safety inspection will be undertaken because the disaster has created a “bad image” both domestically and internationally. The official *Xinhua* news service reported that managers and officials who had overlooked safety would be held responsible and punished.



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