

Overloaded ferry sinks in the Philippines killing at least 42 people

Keith Morgan
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The sinking of the Filipino ferry *M.V. Asia Korea* at dawn on December 23, near Bantayan Island off Cebu province, is a further tragic indictment of the widespread practice across Asia of overloading aged and unseaworthy ferries. Based on the reports of survivors, the vessel struck rocks in heavy seas and its engines and generators stopped. The ferry began listing within 10 minutes of the accident, and went down within half an hour.

The 2,840-tonne, Japanese-built ship, which was 27 years old, was owned by a local company, Trans-Asia Shipping Lines. Management maintains that the ferry was not overloaded and carried 606 passengers with 64 crew. Yet figures released from the disaster relief centre show 713 survivors so far, with 42 confirmed dead, and many people are still unaccounted for. Major General Santos Gabison, a regional commander conducting recovery operations, believes many people are still trapped in the vessel. The ferry was licensed to carry 614 passengers plus crew.

Coast Guard district officials in Cebu have stated they delayed the ferry from leaving on the night of December 22 for more than four hours, after a head count found the vessel was overloaded. The owners were forced to discharge more than 80 passengers. Witnesses claimed, however, that passengers were hidden in the crews quarters and were doubled up in some of the bunks. Erlinda Lacabra, a survivor, told officials her name was not on the passenger list.

Officials said the company, responded to the four hour delay by altering the ferry's course in order to make up time. As a result it entered shallow waters, where the bottom of the vessel was ripped open on rocks.

Not only has the company rejected the official figures, but it has reneged on its promise to provide

financial support to the victims. Initially it had pledged to give the victims families \$US2,750 but no money has been distributed. "Until now Trans-Asia has not given us a single centavo," said Robert Jacomille, a relative of 39-year old victim Joel Jereos.

Edgar Custodio, a spokesman for another victim, said: "We have already spent \$US350 and we don't know where to get money for medicines for those that are still in hospital. Until now we have received nothing and not a single person from Trans-Asia has visited us".

Government authorities are holding up an additional payment of \$US250 to the families of victims to cover burial costs, until they provide proof of identification, such as a birth certificate.

President Joseph Estrada has demanded an investigation and inquiry to determine the causes of the disaster. But press statements are already pointing toward the ship's captain, Porferio Labagday, being made a scapegoat. Commodore Herby Escutin, the chief of the Cebu Coast Guard, said that the ferry captain will be asked to explain the discrepancies in the passenger lists and why he set the course he did. Labagday has made no statement and has been placed in custody by the company, pending a Board of Marine inquiry.

The history of the Philippines domestic shipping industry is atrocious. In 1987, more than 4,300 lives were lost when the *Doña Paz* collided with an oil tanker, making it the world's worst maritime disaster during peacetime. Since then more than 570 people have lost their lives in six separate maritime disasters.

Hundreds of ferries carry many thousands of working people and rural poor between the more than 7,000 islands that make up the Philippines. It is the only affordable means of travel for Filipinos who are

looking for work, or in this case, returning home to see their families for the festive season. In the search for more profit, shipping companies overload the ferries with no regard for the safety of the passengers. Successive Filipino governments have taken little action to control the maritime industry.

The depth of anger at this state of affairs in the Philippines was indicated in an editorial in the *Manila Times* on December 28. Referring to the outcome of previous government inquiries, it stated:

"The powerful and wealthy ship operators and owners are often given a slap on the wrist and that's it. The blame is often borne by the ship officers and crew members that have to make do with floating coffins... Was there ever an instance a government agency was formally charged with negligence? For granting clearance to an overloaded ship? For giving a clean bill of health to a ship not fit to sail? Or to carry passengers? Throughout disasters and deaths, the government agencies have been blameless. And this stinks."



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