

Over 400 lost in Indonesian ferry tragedy as refugees flee fighting in the Maluku

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Ten survivors were picked up a week ago from an overcrowded Indonesian ferry, which had nearly 500 people on board and went missing after it left the Maluku. The ship was carrying 198 passengers and crew as well as 290 refugees fleeing from the religious conflict that has escalated over recent weeks. It was only licensed to carry 250 passengers.

The survivors—six men and four women—explained that the ferry had capsized the previous Thursday after it was engulfed by huge waves during a storm off the island of Sulawesi. It has been in transit from the strife torn island of Halmahera in the North Maluku to Manado, the capital of North Sulawesi, and sank 70 kilometres from its destination.

A passing passenger ship found the survivors who had spent three days and four nights clinging to debris. Only some had been wearing life jackets and when picked up were suffering from severe sunburn and dehydration.

One of the survivors interviewed by rescue officials said that the sea poured into the hold of the Cahaya Bahari just before it sank. She explained that her group survived by desperately clinging to each other and had no idea what happened to the rest of the passengers.

Indonesia's National Search and Rescue Agency chief reported that rescuers had also picked up the body of another passenger believed to be part of the survivors group but who had later died. The remaining 450 passengers and crew are still missing and are feared to have drowned.

Hundreds of relatives waiting at Manado's port, the ferry's destination, were horrified to hear of the fate of family members. "Until now we had been praying that the ship was still afloat. Now we know it has sunk and only a few people have been rescued," John Girobus said. A woman who had safely escaped on a refugee ship from Halmahera a week ago explained that the rest of her family was on the missing boat. "My husband and two

children had to take the boat... They're in the missing boat," she wept.

The tragedy is just one of a number of ferry disasters in Indonesian waters. Overcrowding, inadequate safety measures and lack of seaworthiness checks are common. In the case of the Cahaya Bahari, these problems were compounded by a large number of refugees desperate to flee the Maluku. Hundreds of passengers have died this year in similar disasters, among them 40 aboard the Masnait, a small ferry that capsized carrying refugees from Ambon.

About 300 of the passengers were Christians fleeing the village of Duma on Halmahera where Muslim militias killed 180 people in an attack last month. There were also 30 people on board who had been injured during the attack on the village and were being transferred to hospitals in Sulawesi.

The loss of the Cahaya Bahari only begins to highlight the desperate situation facing the peoples of the Maluku—both Christian and Muslim. During the attack on Duma, 292 homes were destroyed and a church where 200 Christian refugees were taking shelter was bombed and burnt down. After the massacre the local port was a scene of panic as people, mostly women, desperate to escape, fought their way up the gangplanks carrying their belongings and children onto badly maintained and overloaded ferries.

More than 4,000 people have died in fighting between Muslim and Christian militia that erupted in January 1999. Much of Ambon city and other towns and villages on Ambon have been levelled over the last 18 months and clashes have spread to Halmahera and other islands. Hundreds of thousands of refugees—both Christian and Muslim—have fled the fighting.

Who began the fighting is the subject of accusation and counteraccusation. But what is clear is that in the midst of the country's economic and political crisis, the ruling

elites of both Christian and Muslim communities stoked up religious differences in order to shore up their own power and business interests. The religious violence in the Malukas has also been seized upon by conservative Islamic organisations and possibly sections of the military elsewhere in Indonesia out to bolster their own position and undermine the Wahid government.

The clashes between the Christian and Muslim communities have escalated since May and coincide with the arrival of over 2,000 armed militia from the Islamic Laskar Jihad organisation. These thugs were trained in camps outside Jakarta before going to the Malukus. Some have been active in Halmahera where Christian militia drove Muslims out of their villages in the north of the island earlier in the year.

The Maluku governor commented to the Dutch press: “It is a very complicated, very big problem, because national politics is involved. The Laskar Jihad is connected to some political elite, because they come to Ambon without anybody stopping them. Maybe its people from the status quo... well Suharto.”

Despite a state of emergency declared at the end of last month violence has increased, in some cases because the military and mainly Christian local police have been taking sides in the fighting.

Last Tuesday four people died when the Pattimura University in the Malukus was burnt to the ground. Dozens of surrounding homes were destroyed as well. On Thursday there were reports of another village being destroyed. Twenty-two people were killed, 60 people injured and hundreds of houses destroyed in the village of Waai, near Ambon.

The aid agency Medicins sans Frontieres announced it was suspending its work on the islands, as the situation was too dangerous. The organisation warned that medical supplies and services would run out and that the supply of drinking water to some of the refugee camps had already stopped.

The spokesman also said that refugees would continue to pack themselves onto boats to escape because they were desperate and had few other options.



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