

Ferry disaster in Bangladesh claims 300 lives

Deepal Jayasekera**8 May 2002**

More than 300 people have died in one of Bangladesh's worst ferry disasters. The triple-decked *MV Shalahuddin-2* was caught in a storm in the Meghna River last Friday on its way from the capital Dhaka to Patuakhali. About 170km south of Dhaka, it capsized and sank rapidly at around 9.30pm. Most of those on board had little chance of escaping.

One survivor Mohammed Altaf, 40, described what happened: "It was dark and we were sitting on the ferry's congested upper deck. It was bristling. Then came the strong wind and the ferry lifted to one side. Within minutes I was thrown overboard into the water and I saw the ferry going down as well."

Another survivor Shah Alam explained that those on the vessel's upper deck were able to get free of the boat but passengers on the two lower decks had virtually no chance. "They probably could not come out and must have gone down with the ferry," he said. Even those who managed to get clear of the sinking vessel had a struggle to reach the shore. Rescuers attempting to reach the scene had to battle through stormy conditions.

Eyewitnesses reported bodies strewn along the riverbank. When a new body surfaced, hundreds thronged to see whether it was one of their relatives. A 10-year-old survivor Asiya Begum was searching in tears for her mother, sister and sister-in-law. "I cannot find them, can somebody say if they are all dead," she wailed.

It was only on Monday that the full extent of the tragedy became clear. Salvage operations were able to partially raise the sunken ferry, which lay in about 20 metres of water, after attempts the previous day had to be abandoned. "We faced a harrowing situation. It was hard to believe our eyes," one official said. "Some bodies popped up from inside the ferry when it was being pulled up. Many bodies could have been swept away," a witness explained.

According to Shipping Minister Akbar Hossain, the

death toll has reached about 340. Some survivors said the ferry, which was licenced to carry only 310 passengers, was carrying as many as twice that number. As a result the number of dead is likely to rise even further and an accurate figure will never be known. The ferry carried no list of passengers and conducted no head count.

Officials and the ferry's owners immediately denied any responsibility. One owner Shabbudin Milon, who was supervising the salvage work, claimed the ferry was carrying only about half its registered capacity. Officials insisted that reports of 400 people being aboard were wrong. The Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority claimed that the ferry was carrying between 125 and 150 passengers when it left Dhaka.

But survivors challenged these figures, saying the number of passengers was over 500. Mohammed Altaf said: "It was packed beyond its carrying capacity." Another survivor said: "The ferry was over crowded. There were not even enough life buoys to hold on to survive in the water."

More than a thousand passenger ferries offer cheap transport between Dhaka and 12 southern districts and such tragedies occur regularly, particularly in the current stormy season. Many of the ferries are poorly maintained and lack appropriate certificates. Even in those cases where the vessels have been certified as seaworthy, it is usually a matter of bribes paid to the inspectors and officials.

The ferry captains are not well trained for the job, which places the lives of hundreds of passengers in their hands. As in the case of the *MV Shalahuddin-2*, the vessels are grossly overcrowded with passengers and goods. Few of them are equipped with adequate safety gear, such as life jackets and navigational equipment. Consequently, sinkings are frequent.

In the past 26 years, 496 launch mishaps have been reported and more than 5,000 people died. In December

2000, nearly 200 died when the overcrowded ferry *Rajhongashi* sank in the Meghna River after colliding with another ferry in heavy fog. In May of the same year at least 100 died when a ferry capsized in the same river. In May 1996, two ferries collided in the river Jamuna and 77 were killed.

The *New Nation* commented in its editorial: “The inland waterways are in complete anarchic conditions to say the least. Overloading, which was very probably at the root of last Friday’s accident, is more the rule than the exception. It is a fairly common sight to see launches in dilapidated conditions and carrying several times their capacities in humans and cargoes in the rivers.

“Besides, most of these launches were never built observing proper technical specifications to make them strong to withstand storms. Most of them do not carry adequate number of life buoys or similar devices to be used in case of emergency. The training of men at the wheel is also found lacking in many cases and also the training of other members of the crew. No wonder that the inland waterways have turned very unsafe for travel.”

The Bangladesh government’s response is part of well-tested and cynical routine. Prime Minister Khalida Zia expressed her “deep concern” over the disaster and “directed” the authorities to conduct speedy rescue operations. The Shipping Ministry has established two committees to “probe” into the causes—one at Zia’s direction is headed by the Deputy Secretary of the Shipping Ministry and the other is under the auspices of Abdul Hoque, the Principal of the Mercantile Marine Department.

As the *New Nation* noted: “There have been many launch mishaps over the years. In the aftermath of each accident, the typical response was to set up an investigation committee. But the committees, intriguingly, did not produce full reports on the causes of the accidents. Let us also hope that there will be a departure this time and that the findings of the committee would be disclosed.”

But no one really believes that these investigations will do more than prepare another report that will gather dust alongside previous ones. As one survivor, Monuwar Begum, commented: “Every time there is an accident they say these things. But the governments have done nothing to make our journey safe.”

Vessel owners ignore safety regulations because to carry out maintenance, install basic safety equipment and navigational aids, and hire trained crew would eat into their profits. The government and state authorities, which look after the interests of business, turn a blind eye, or, in the event of a public outcry, make a few cosmetic gestures. Those who are compelled to bear the consequences are workers and the poor who have no choice but to use the unsafe, overcrowded ferries to travel long distances.



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