

Senegal ferry disaster kills close to a thousand passengers

Barbara Slaughter
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The Senegalese ferry *Joola* capsized in a storm off the coast of Gambia on the night of September 26. Out of the 1,034 passengers and crew on board, only 64 people have been rescued and approximately 400 bodies—many of them children—have been recovered. It is the country's worst maritime disaster and ranks as one of the world's worst ferry accidents of all time.

When the disaster occurred the boat was carrying nearly double its official capacity of 550 passengers. It left the port of Ziguinchor, in the south of Senegal bound for the capital Dakar. Two hundred passengers and crew boarded the ferry at a second stop.

The passengers were mostly Senegalese. Some were traders taking dried fish, mangoes and palm oil to sell in Dakar. Others were students and schoolchildren, returning from the south to begin the new academic year. There were also passengers from neighbouring Guinea-Bissau and Gambia on board, as well as French and Spanish tourists.

According to survivors the boat overturned in heavy seas in a matter of minutes, leaving most of the passengers trapped inside. Survivors described the horror of clinging to the keel of the upturned boat and hearing the screams of passengers below them.

Hours later the survivors were picked up by Senegalese fishermen, who risked their lives in dangerous seas to carry out the rescue. France, the former colonial power, lent a rescue plane, helicopter and boats for the recovery of bodies.

After hearing of the disaster many desperate relatives and friends headed for the port in Dakar in the early hours of the next morning to await news. Military police were called in to control them. Others waited at the hospitals for the posting of the lists of names of survivors.

Angry protesters, relatives and friends of those on the

ferry gathered outside the residence of Senegal's President Abdoulaye Wade and demanded to know who was responsible for the disaster. In an attempt to defuse the anger of the crowd, Wade said the state would take responsibility and would compensate victims' families. He said that there had been "an accumulation of errors", adding that the ferry "was too high in the water, too slow". He admitted that the *Joola*, which is flat-bottomed, "was a boat designed for lakes" and totally unsuitable for sea use. He called for three days of official mourning and promised an inquiry into the disaster.

The ship had suffered damage to one of its engines as a result of a storm on a previous sailing, but was not taken out of commission. The non-government paper *Le Sud Quotidien* ran a front-page story under the banner, "This ship should never have taken to the water." The *Walfadjri* newspaper accused the government of "criminal populism" for letting the ferry be put back into service following extensive repairs.

According to Reuters, witnesses have stated that the boat was listing heavily to one side on its departure from the harbour at Ziguinchor. A report in *This Day* (Lagos) spoke of unconfirmed reports of engine failure on an earlier trip and also cited rumours of the boat being overloaded with merchandise as well as passengers.

The ferry is state owned and run by the Senegalese army. The route is a widely used by people travelling between the main region of Senegal and the southern province of Casamance. Since independence in 1960 there has been civil unrest in the south, with the separatist Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MDFC) pushing for independence. President Wade signed a peace deal with the MDFC last year, but splits within the separatist movement have

made this ineffective.

The activities of the MDFC make travel overland between the two parts of Senegal hazardous. This is compounded by the division of much of Casamance from northern Senegal by the relatively tiny strip of land that constitutes Gambia, a former British colony. Overland travellers have to pass across its border and through its customs posts, making the ferry trip the favoured option.

The sinking of the *Joola* is a stark manifestation of the deterioration of the Senegalese economy and infrastructure. In July 2000 Senegal was designated as one of the world's least developed countries. It is 160th out of 175 in the league table of human development of the United Nations Development Programme.

The International Monetary Fund imposed a structural adjustment programme at the end of the 1980s, which was followed by an austerity programme and the devaluation of the currency in 1994. Debt servicing takes a massive 14.4 percent of GNP and although foreign aid has tripled over the past 15 years, two thirds of it goes in debt repayments.

President Wade's admission of state responsibility for the sinking of the *Joola* will in all probability result in some individual state official being scapegoated. But Wade and his predecessor, who have supported the implementation of IMF policies, are responsible together with the western powers for the catastrophic situation in the country that resulted in this disaster.



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