

Ferry disaster in Bangladesh claims hundreds of lives

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Hundreds of people are dead after one of Bangladesh's worst ferry disasters. The badly overcrowded ferry, the MV Nazreen-1, sank in flood-swollen waters at the confluence of the Padma, Meghna and Dakatia rivers, some 170 kilometres southeast of the capital Dhaka, on the night of July 8.

So far 165 bodies have been recovered but the final death toll is expected to be much higher. According to eyewitnesses, the triple-deck ferry, which is licensed to carry 294 passengers, was packed with as many as 1,000 people and a large cargo of rice and vegetables. The ferry operators have no record of how many, or who, was on board. Only 220 of the crew and passengers were able to free themselves and swim to safety.

The ferry itself was only found on July 14, after six days of searching by the navy. The vessel is in 40 metres of water and partially buried in sand. There are no immediate plans to salvage the ferry, as the river currents are deemed too risky. Rescuers believe that some bodies may have washed into the Bay of Bengal and will never be found.

MV Nazreen-1 was travelling from the Sadarghat terminal in Dhaka to Lalmohan in Bhola. As well as being overloaded, the ferry had entered a particularly dangerous area of the river. In 1986, the country's worst ferry disaster claimed the lives of 600 people at the same spot. In 1994 another ferry sank killing more than 150 passengers and crew—the vessel itself was never found.

An official from the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) told the press that ferries were “generally advised” to avoid the Meghna confluence from July to mid-October. The ferry “deviated from the original route on the night of disaster and directly plied through the risk-prone zone

of Dakatia,” he said.

Samir Chandra Adhikari, who was on the roof of the ferry, said: “It was turned aside suddenly. Within moments it started nose-diving and I jumped into the river.” Another survivor, 50-year old Abdul Gani lost all five members of his family. “I tried my best to pull out my son, Ibrahim, through the window. But I failed,” he declared grief-stricken.

Hundreds of anxious family members, relatives and friends camped on the riverbank hoping for some news. Mohammad Sadek, a rickshaw puller, told the press: “I have been here since Wednesday, looking for my wife and baby son and seven other relatives who were on board... I rushed here with the little cash I had on me as soon as I heard about the ferry, but now I have run out of money and have not eaten all day.”

Resentment grew over the failure of rescue operations. A 35-year old survivor, Mohammad Ali, whose mother and two younger brothers are missing, said: “Authorities failed even to salvage the ferry or retrieve trapped victims. This is disgusting”. Khaleda Aktar, a 25-year-old mother, who was on the top deck and managed to swim to safety, lost her 5-month-old baby. “I shall not leave this place until I find my son,” she said.

In response to the growing anger, the government sent two 60-tonne vessels—the MV Hamza and MV Rustam—to assist rescue operations. But it was largely for show. According to the *New Nation* newspaper, Shipping Minister Akbar Hossain admitted that “these two old vessels cannot salvage the sunken launch weighing more than 120 tonnes.”

Hossain rejected calls for him to step down, saying: “If I had created the problem, then I would have resigned. But I have not created the problem.” He said

that he could not guarantee such disasters would not happen again and attempted to blame the passengers, saying that it was up to them to decide not to board overcrowded ferries.

Hossain's comments are both callous and cynical. Most people have no choice but to use the relatively cheap ferries as a means of transport. Successive governments, on the other hand, have turned a blind eye to the open flouting of rudimentary safety standards by ferry operators, despite disaster after disaster.

Prior to the MV Nazreen-1 sinking, there have been 21 ferry accidents this year, resulting in over 400 deaths. According to the *New Nation*, last year there were 17 accidents and the loss of more than 300 lives. Even according to understated official figures, there have been around 260 ferry disasters in Bangladesh since 1977, resulting in more than 3,000 deaths.

Situated between India and Burma, most of the landmass of Bangladesh is part of the Ganges River delta system. It is low-lying and crisscrossed by 230 rivers that flow into the Bay of Bengal. In all, there are more than 8,000 miles of waterways. Ferries are the obvious means of transport, but they are in short supply.

Ferry operators exploit these conditions and openly ignore government regulations, bribing BIWTA officials to ignore breaches of government regulations. According to one report, out of 20,000 ferries in the country, only 8,000 are registered. Of those just 800 have the required safety certificates. Most of launches, steamers and other vessels lack mechanical steering and still have manual steering systems that are a century old. They are poorly constructed and lack basic safety features such as lifeboats or lifejackets.

As in other cases, the government of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has established a welfare fund for the victims of the MV Nazreen-1 disaster and promised an official inquiry. But the recommendations of such investigations are rarely implemented. In the wake of ferry sinkings in April that claimed over 125 lives, the government banned hundreds of unfit and defective ferries. But it quickly reversed its decision when ferry operators staged a three-day protest strike.

In 1989, under the military rule of General Ershad, the government even changed the Inland Shipping Ordinance to prevent ferry owners from being held legally responsible for sinkings and the loss of life.

Only the actual operator could be punished. After the latest disaster, the Zia government has promised to reinsert "owners" back into the ordinance. A draft amendment is to be presented to cabinet next month.

However, no major overhaul of ferry safety standards will take place. The ruling four-party coalition came to power after the 2001 elections pledging, among other things, to improve the safety standards of ferries but has done very little. Its latest promises are just as worthless.

Within 12 hours of the MV Nazreen-1 sinking, a cargo vessel collided with a small ferry near Chandipur, killing another 11 people. The dangers that Bangladeshi people are constantly forced to endure on the country's rivers are just one particularly graphic example of the priorities of the capitalist system: where the profit requirements of a few predominate over the well-being and lives of millions.



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