

Egypt: Relatives of victims sack offices of ferry firm

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Hundreds of relatives—outraged over the deaths of their loved ones in the sinking of the Egyptian ferry Al-Salam Boccaccio 98 in the Red Sea—attacked the offices of the ship’s owners on Sunday.

They destroyed furniture at Al-Salam Maritime’s offices in the Red Sea port of Agafa Safaga, Egypt, threw fixtures and fittings onto the street, and set fire to the company’s sign. They also burned a large picture of one of the company’s fleet of ships.

Others set fires to car tyres, closing the roads leading to the port until the arrival of firefighters. A fire engine was attacked, and riot police fired tear gas. At least one man was injured in struggles with the police.

About 800 people are still missing out of 1,400 people on board when the ship sank late Thursday, February 2, after a fire broke out in the parking bay. Almost 200 corpses have been recovered from the sea, along with 400 survivors. Only a handful of survivors were pulled from the sea on Sunday, which suggests that the final death toll may reach 1,000.

Most passengers were Egyptians working in Saudi Arabia.

Survivors have told how the captain of the ageing roll-on, roll-off ferry, Sayed Omar, insisted on continuing on to Egypt, 110 miles away, after a fire had broken out just 20 miles off the coast of Saudi Arabia. The rescue mission was delayed for hours, until after the ship had failed to arrive in port, leaving people in the water for more than 13 hours with only a minority able to cram onto the few life rafts that were launched.

This wanton loss of life has generated intense hostility towards the company and the government of President Hosni Mubarak.

Riot police were deployed in Safaga port on Sunday after relatives stormed the dockside demanding information. Several hundred also gathered at a morgue

in Cairo where some 68 bodies were taken.

An article in the British *Guardian* gives an indication of the conditions that have sparked such outrage. It describes the small port town as being so full of relatives that “the pavements can’t hold them, and cars move slowly through the crowds.”

The article continues: “Frustration is building, fuelled by the lack of information from officials and allegations that the boat had pushed on despite the fire, that passengers had been locked into their cabins and that the crew had escaped first.

“The list comes at 1:30, read out on a tinny megaphone in a car park nearby. The crowd presses in, trying to hear, but most can’t get close enough.

“ ‘This is stupid,’ says one man, looking up at the sky helplessly, ‘I can’t hear the names! I don’t know where she is’.... The frustration soon finds expression, and release. With the meagre roll-call complete, the crowd returns to the police line. Hands are waved and there is shouting. Somehow, very quickly, it escalates from fists to pebbles, to chunks of concrete and bottles which rain down on the police lines, clearing the street as the indiscriminate volleys crash around their targets.

“The police throw back and fire a teargas canister. Then there is a lull.”

On Monday, protesters also clashed with police at Egypt’s Hurgada hospital. They became angry when a line of police officers displayed photographs of those who had drowned. Many demanded to see the bodies of their loved ones in the hospital morgue. They broke through security barriers, but did not manage to get through to the hospital.

The situation in the hospital is horrific. An *Agence France-Presse* reporter said that rows had broken out between families claiming the same bodies, which were so bloated as to be unrecognisable. A hospital official

told the media, “It’s normal there would be disputes about the identity because after some time in the sea, it’s like the face has come off.”

Mubarak’s efforts to calm the situation have had the opposite impact. A government pledge to pay US\$5,200 to the family of each victim and US\$2,600 to survivors, along with US\$26,000 provided by the company for each victim, backfired. To receive compensation, a death certificate is needed, but bodies have not been identified. One man waiting news of his brother shouted outside the hospital, “If you don’t have the bodies, at least give us certificates and let us go. You have been torturing us for days.”

Mubarak has ordered an investigation into the sinking, but there is little confidence in it. Some independent Egyptian newspapers have accused the government of protecting Al-Salam Maritime because it has close connections with top officials. The weekly *Soutelomma* noted that two other ferries owned by the company had sunk in the past 10 years, without any major investigation and with no prosecutions resulting. The Al Salam Boccaccio 98 was involved in a collision in 1999. And the Al Salam 95, a sister ship, sank in October after a collision with a cargo vessel.

Egyptian press reports have alleged that a ship cited earlier as having received a report that the Al Salam Boccaccio 98 was in trouble, but failing to respond, was one of the company’s other ships.



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