

Egypt: Further revelations of gross negligence in ferry disaster

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More evidence has emerged of the Egyptian authorities' negligent role in the Al-Salam Boccaccio 98 ferry disaster. On February 3, an estimated 1,000 of the 1,400 passengers on board the vessel died in what is the worst maritime tragedy in Egypt's history. The Mubarak dictatorship has come under sustained attack as grief has turned to anger.

The rescue effort was officially called off on February 10. A total of 388 people were rescued from the Red Sea, and 400 bodies recovered. The remaining 600 passengers are presumed drowned.

An official investigation into the disaster is yet to release any of its findings, and details remain unclear as to how the ship sank and why no rescue effort was launched until six hours after the ferry went down.

What is known is that Al-Salam Boccaccio 98 was not fit to carry any passengers, let alone the 1,400 people who were jammed beyond capacity into the boat.

The 36-year-old vessel was purchased by the Egyptian firm Al-Salam Maritime in Europe at a reduced price after it was no longer licensed to carry passengers. Under European regulations, only livestock was permitted to be transported on the ferry. Egyptian shipping companies frequently use old downgraded European vessels for passenger services.

Al-Salam Boccaccio 98 was officially registered as a Panamanian ship. Panama is a widely used "flag of convenience" for shipping companies because of the country's low registration costs and largely un-enforced safety regulations.

The ferry appears to have sunk as a result of an electrical fire that broke out shortly after it departed the Saudi Arabian port of Dubba for Safaga in Egypt. According to international marine arbitrator and Red Sea expert Wessam Hafez, carbon dioxide fire

extinguishers were unavailable. When crew used water to put out the fire, the ferry's balance was disrupted as there were no pumps to remove the water.

Al-Salam Boccaccio 98 was a "roll-on roll-off" ferry, which have notorious safety records and easily capsize if they take on water.

It remains unclear exactly when Egyptian authorities first received notice that the ferry had sunk. According to most accounts, the ship went down between 1 and 2 a.m. The ship's automatic emergency equipment, which should have sent out a distress signal to surrounding ports and vessels, may not have worked. "The absence of a working distress signal is a grave violation of maritime law by the company boat's owner," Wessam Hafez told *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

According to the government, the ferry's owners only notified authorities that the vessel was in trouble at 7 a.m., and that it was feared to have sunk at 7:45 a.m.. Egyptian navy vessels and planes only arrived at the disaster site well after 8 a.m. By this time all but a few hundred of the passengers had drowned.

Survivors have reported that there was a shortage of life-saving equipment on board, despite the ship's passenger safety certificate recording ample life jackets and boats.

The British Ministry of Defence last week released a statement that a Royal Air Force station at Kinloss, Scotland received a distress beacon from the ferry at 1:58 a.m. Egyptian time. The RAF insists it then passed this information on to the Egyptian authorities.

This statement directly contradicts the Mubarak regime's account of the events of February 3. If true, it would indicate that a cover-up has been launched to suppress direct evidence of the Egyptian authorities' gross criminal negligence.

The ferry's owners have denied that any distress

signal was sent, and insist that it would not be possible for only one station to pick up a distress beacon. According to one Egyptian report, however, the signal was not received at Safaga, the ferry's intended destination, because the monitoring station was unmanned at the time.

Another ferry owned by Al-Salam Maritime, the St. Catherine, was in the Red Sea when the Al-Salam Boccaccio 98 went down, but could not turn around and assist the victims out of fear that it too would capsize.

The St. Catherine's captain has told the Egyptian media that he was alerted by company owners that the Al-Salam Boccaccio 98 was in trouble before he departed from the Safaga port in Egypt at 2.45 a.m. The St. Catherine repeatedly failed to make radio contact with the sunken vessel. According to the captain, he made contact with one of the ferry's officers who was in a lifeboat shortly before 7 a.m.

Despite being just 25 miles away, the St. Catherine could not turn back and help as it was overloaded with 1,800 passengers. "I feared the St. Catherine would capsize if I turned sideways into the wind to make a turn to back," the captain said. "There could have been two disasters instead of one."

The inability of the ship to turn around without fear of sinking underscores the lack of even elementary safety standards on Egypt's ferry services.

The Mubarak regime's delay in releasing any of the findings from its investigation has led to accusations that it is seeking to protect government officials connected to the ferry's owner, Mamdouh Ismail. Ismail is a member of the Shura Council, the parliamentary upper house in Egypt. According to one report, his status as a parliamentarian renders him immune from any prosecution over the Al-Salam Boccaccio 98's sinking.

Two other boats owned by Ismail's company have sunk in the past 10 years, and no punitive action was taken.

The government's response to the ferry disaster has outraged ordinary Egyptians. Even the tightly controlled state media has been forced to express some measure of the popular anger. *Al-Akhbar* wrote that the ship's sinking represents "a blunt indication of the strength of corruption, the pervasiveness of which has now gotten completely beyond government control." A

column in the leading *Al-Ahram* daily newspaper accused the authorities of "impotence, failure and inefficiency" and said that the disaster "proves [the government's] hardheartedness and indifference in dealing with the human feelings of thousands of citizens who lost their loved ones as a result of negligence and corruption."

President Hosni Mubarak has attempted to distance his regime and the company's owners. "Those who are responsible will not escape without punishment," he declared. "There is no one in Egypt who is above law or questioning, and as an Egyptian, I am angry and sad for what happened."

Such feigned anger is unlikely to placate ordinary Egyptians. The ferry disaster has highlighted the country's deep class divisions. The victims were mostly migrant workers in Saudi Arabia. Egypt's unemployment rate is believed to be more than 20 percent, and large numbers of impoverished workers are forced to seek work in the oil-rich Gulf States. Remittances from Saudi Arabia alone are estimated at \$US600-800 million per year.

A number of angry statements from survivors of the ferry disaster and relatives of the victims demonstrated the deep-rooted opposition to the Mubarak dictatorship.

"If just one tourist had been on board, I swear they would have left no stone unturned until they found the body," Mohamad Diab, a farmer from Sohag, said. "When 14 tourists were killed in a bus accident last week, every state apparatus was on red alert. But because we are poor people, the government ignores our distress. It's not like we are asking the government to treat us like tourists; we just want to be treated like human beings."



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