

Heavy losses feared amongst 1,400 passengers of sunken Egyptian ferry

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4 February 2006

Dozens of bodies have been pulled from the water following the sinking of an 35-year-old Egyptian ferry in the Red Sea. The ship was carrying at least 1,310 passengers and 96 crew, according to a spokesman for the ship's owners, el-Salam Maritime Transport, as well as five trucks and 22 cars.

Owners of the Panamanian-flagged ship reported late Friday that 300 to 400 passengers had been rescued, but police authorities could confirm only 241 people found alive. The official confirmed death toll stood at 185.

Hundreds remained unaccounted for as night fell, raising fears that the numbers of dead could be extremely high. Maritime sources reported that rough seas and strong winds were impeding the work of rescue crews. Survivors still in the water after dark would go into shock as temperatures fall. The region is also known for its strong currents.

The Al Salam Boccaccio 98 sank about 80 kilometres offshore during an overnight journey from Dubai in Saudi Arabia to Safaga in Egypt that should have lasted around five hours. Most people using the route are Egyptians working in Saudi Arabia, their families returning from their Eid holidays, street vendors or suppliers. Some were returning from the hajj pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. The passengers included about 1,200 Egyptians, as well as 99 Saudis, 3 Syrians, 2 Sudanese and a Canadian, according to one source.

The cause of the sinking is not known, but there were high winds when the ship left Dubai, a sandstorm overnight on Saudi Arabia's west coast and thunderstorms earlier in the area where the vessel was last seen on radar.

The head of administration at el-Salam Maritime Transport, Adel Shukri, initially said he did not know of any SOS having been sent. He said that the rescue

operation had started just after midnight, an hour to an hour and a half after the ship went missing.

Four Egyptian frigates from the Coast Guard, a navy destroyer and helicopters were looking for survivors before nightfall Friday, but there were still high winds and rough seas. The US Navy Central Command headquarters in Bahrain contacted the Egyptian government offering help, and Egypt accepted. Egyptian authorities accepted a US offer to divert a P3-Orion maritime naval patrol aircraft to the area after initially declining. Britain announced that it had sent the warship HMS Bulwark to help, but it would not arrive for at least a day. Reports followed that it had been recalled, with no explanation given. An Egyptian spokesman said there was a "vast area of water" to search.

Saudi ships were patrolling waters off their shores, but found no survivors or victims.

Despite official reassurances, there are mounting questions regarding the ship's safety and seaworthiness, not least by relatives of possible victims. Relatives of the passengers have complained of the information they received as they waited for the ship to dock. "How can they put all these passengers in such an old ship that was not fit for sailing?" asked Ahmed Abdul Hamid, a teacher waiting news of his cousin.

A number of questions are raised as to what could have caused the ship to sink and on the response of the authorities.

Most sources reject the possibility of a collision, as no one reported an incident. But the area has a history of accidents. In 1991 more than 500 people were killed when a ferry hit a coral reef outside the same Egyptian port. The Al Salam Boccaccio 98 was involved in a collision in 1999. And the Al Salam 95, a sister ship owned by the same company, sank in the Red Sea in

October after a collision with a Cypriot cargo vessel at the southern entrance to the Suez Canal. There was a stampede among passengers trying to escape during which two people were killed and 40 injured.

Then there is the more substantial question of the ship's safety.

The Al Salam 98 was built in 1970 in Italy and was close to its full capacity of 1,487. Transport Minister Mohammed Lutfy Mansour stressed that there had been no concerns about the seaworthiness of the ship. The Saudi branch of the maritime insurance company Lloyd's also said the ship had met all safety requirements, with all lifeboats and valid certificates.

Others have raised serious doubts.

David Osler, of Lloyd's List, said that last June the ship passed a structural survey test conducted by the International Safety Management Code. But he told CNN that the Al Salam Boccaccio 98 was a roll-on roll-off ferry—a design known to suffer stability problems. One such vessel, The Herald of Free Enterprise, sank at Zeebrugge, Belgium, in 1987, killing 193 passengers. The Estonia, built in 1979, sank in 1994 en route to Stockholm, Sweden, with the loss of 852 lives out of 1,000 passengers.

Osler explained, "Once a small amount of water gets on board it can set up an uncontrollable rocking that causes rapid capsizing."

While safety standards in the developed world had improved markedly after Zeebrugge, he continued, "This vessel was pensioned off from Italy. It may have been overloaded."

Osler also told the *Times*, "It would only take a bit of water to get on board this ship and it would be all over.... The percentage of this type of ferry involved in this type of disaster is huge."

Steve Todd, national secretary of the Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers union in Britain, told the BBC, "Certainly in British waters, that type of ferry of that age would not be seen these days.... It's very, very rare to be seen in most parts of the world."

The ship also appears to have been modified in order to carry extra passengers. Yvan Perchoc, a French-based shipping expert, told Associated France Press that the Al Salam Boccaccio 98 is one of several old Italian ferries to which extra levels were added in order to increase capacity.

"Among the ships operating crossings in the Red

Sea...some are remarkable because of the height of their structures. They are old Italian ferries to which four extra decks have been added, raising the capacity from 500 to around 1,400.... Despite the addition of extra bulges on the sides of these ships, one can wonder about their stability."

Of possible significance is the fact that Farid al-Douadi, the agent for the ship in Saudi Arabia, said that there were around 220 vehicles on board and that the ship had the capacity for 2,500 passengers—both figures well in excess of those cited by company spokesmen in Egypt.

It is not known if the ship had enough lifejackets.

Then there is the delay in mounting the rescue operation—according to official sources, it did not begin for over an hour. Others put the delay between the time the ship disappeared from the radar and the launch of rescue vessels as longer. Controllers lost radar contact with the ferry around two hours after it left Duba at 7 p.m. But no action was taken until after midnight in Egypt—which with the one-hour time difference leaves a gap of at least two hours.

There are only sketchy reports about what finally motivated a response. Egypt's state news agency said that another ferry in the area received a distress call from Al Salam's captain, who said his ship was in danger of sinking, but did not say how the second ferry had reacted. Adel Shukri, head of administration at the Cairo headquarters of el-Salam Maritime Transport, said coastal stations did not receive an SOS message from the crew, but said nothing about who had reported the sinking.

The rescue ships did not arrive until 10 hours after the ageing ferry was believed to have sunk.

Egypt's president, Hosni Mubarak, has ordered an immediate inquiry, and a presidential spokesman raised questions about the ship's safety. He said that "the speed at which the ship sank and the fact there were not enough life rafts on board confirm that there was a problem."



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