

# Survivors speak of horrific events leading to Egyptian ferry sinking

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6 February 2006

The accounts of survivors of the sinking of the Egyptian ferry Al-Salaam Boccaccio 98 in the Red Sea paint a terrible picture of criminal negligence by captain and crew as well as the ship's owners.

An Egyptian cabinet spokesman told the media late Sunday that preliminary figures showed rescuers had pulled 387 survivors from the sea and found 135 bodies so far, leaving the possibility of close to 1,000 casualties. Rescue officials in Safaga, Egypt, had earlier indicated that 460 survivors and 195 bodies had been found.

The Al-Salaam Boccaccio 98 was carrying more than 1,400 passengers and crew and 220 cars when it quickly sank in the early hours of Friday, February 3, 55 miles from the Egyptian port of Hurghada. It was travelling between the Saudi port of Dubah and Safaga in Egypt, on the opposite side of the Red Sea. Most of the passengers were Egyptian workers returning from Saudi Arabia.

The Egyptian government's rescue efforts were only initiated after the ship failed to arrive, and rescue vessels did not reach the scene until at least 10 hours after the ferry was believed to have sunk.

An Egyptian Navy official said the first survivor was picked out of the water about 3 p.m., more than 13 hours after the ship went down.

Survivors said that the ship's captain, Sayed Omar, had insisted on continuing on to Egypt, 110 miles away, after a fire had broken out—in either the engine room or a truck parked in the lower deck's parking bay—when the ship was just 20 miles off the coast of Saudi Arabia. He and his crew had reportedly not merely ignored the appeals of passengers to turn around, but had locked some in their cabins.

According to one report, the ferry had 10 lifeboats that could have each taken up to 100 people. None were used, and only a few of the ship's 88 life rafts that can each carry 25 people were deployed. Some passengers apparently remained asleep. Some said that crew members had prevented them from wearing lifejackets. Survivors said many of the passengers were trapped in lower levels of the ship and would not have made it out before it disappeared into the water.

With the blaze out of control, those passengers not locked in their rooms moved to one side of the vessel causing it to list

badly and take on water. An explosion was heard, and high winds helped push over the unbalanced ship.

The head of Al Salaam Maritime Transport Co., the ferry operator, Mamdouh Ismail, said, "The weather was especially bad. The wind was blowing at 65 miles."

The ship's captain is still missing, but some passengers have said he and some of his crew fled in one of the first life rafts to launch, and others said he took a speedboat.

Eyewitnesses, most of whom are Egyptian workers employed in Saudi Arabia, describe scenes of unimaginable horror.

Ahmed Abdel Wahab, 30, spent 20 hours in the sea, sometimes holding on to a barrel from the ship and later taking a lifejacket from a dead body, before being hauled on to a rescue boat. He said, "We told the crew, 'Let's turn back, let's call for help,' but they refused and said everything was under control."

Nazih Zaki, 27, said, "Two hours after we left, smoke started coming out. They tried to put it out but it kept going. The crew told us it was nothing, but then they got us life vests to wear. We stayed cruising six hours at sea, and then the boat started to tip."

Egyptian survivor Shahata Ali said, "We were wearing lifejackets but they told us there was nothing wrong, told us to take them off and they took [them] away. Then the boat started to sink and the captain took a boat and left."

Ahmed Eliwa, 29, said, "Suddenly, there was a huge explosion, there was glass flying and one person near me was cut to pieces. I could not see him any more, then the boat began sinking on one side. There was panic because the boat started to tilt and to keel. Women were crying out, screaming and pleading. I saw some couples, embracing as if it was their last moment together."

Many of the women and children stayed on the boat. "I think they were too scared to go into the water. I jumped in the water with a life jacket. There was a girl in the water, 13 years old. Her name was Alaa and she was alone. She called out to me, 'Uncle! Uncle!' I put her on my back and swam. I got her to a boat and put her inside. But there was no place for me and I stayed in the water until I was rescued."

Riyat Farahat, 36, said, "It was gone after 10 minutes.... People were jumping from the boat into the sea. Those who

could swim made it.... The captain was the first to get into a lifeboat.”

Sayed Abdul Hakim, 32, said, “It was like watching the movie *Titanic*.... None of the crew brought down life boats or even told us how to use them. I swam for three hours. Then I spotted a rubber boat and I climbed in. I stayed there for 18 hours. I felt I was a dead man.”

Another survivor stated, “There was yelling and screaming and people dying and there were people dead in their life vests, and there were huge waves.”

Survivors who had spent hours in the cold, shark-infested waters, were finally brought to Hurghada General Hospital. They said more than 50 people clung to each emergency vessel, with many others simply floating in life jackets or hanging on to life buoys. “Our lifeboat was stuffed with more than 50 people and was filled with water,” said one. “We had to keep bailing with buckets and throwing dead bodies over the side as the day turned into night.”

Girgis Rifaat, 30, said he had spent 18 hours on a boat holding more than 50 survivors who were crammed so close together that they had difficulty breathing.

“We bailed water and prayed. As many as 25 died on the boat and we dumped them overboard. If the boat had returned to Saudi Arabia when the fire first broke out, the tragedy might have been averted.”

The ferry disaster has aroused intense anger throughout Egypt, much of it directed not only at the company but at the Egyptian government and President Hosni Mubarak.

Relatives awaiting news outside the port of Safaga—the ship’s intended destination—clashed with police and threw rocks, with 11 police officers injured. Some tried to raid official buildings, and police fired tear gas at the crowd. Broad layers of the population empathise with their anger. Tens of thousands of Egyptians are forced to work for years in Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf countries by the economic hardship they face.

Some of the relatives chanted, “Down with the interior ministry, down with Mubarak.”

Moustafa Zayed, 24, whose father was on the ship, said, “Had the government made any job opportunities available at home, these people wouldn’t have been forced to go abroad in the first place.”

Shaaban el-Qott, 55, told the press, “May God destroy Hosni Mubarak! This government was supposed to throw this ship away and get a new one.”

A woman told Associated Press, “This is a dirty government, may God burn their hearts as they burned mine. I want my brother. I have no one else in this life.”

Mubarak has attempted to defuse public anger by flying to Hurghada, about 40 miles north of Safaga, to visit survivors in two hospitals. He ordered that the families of each victim be paid \$5,200 in compensation and the survivors \$2,600 each. The owner of the company, Mamdouh Ismail, has said that it

would give the family of everyone who died \$26,000, which he said was the maximum provided for in Egyptian law.

Aside from the role in the disaster played by the captain and crew, the fact remains that the ship itself was unsafe.

Owners Al Salaam have stated that the ship and its crew met international standards and that it was checked twice last year by Italy’s maritime safety body, Registro Italiano Navale. However, RINA faces prosecution in France for allegedly failing to properly check the Maltese-flagged tanker Erika, which broke up off the French coast six years ago. And the 35-year-old Italian vessel would not have been permitted to sail if it had been registered under Egyptian laws prohibiting any vessel older than 25 years old, which is one reason why the ship was registered in Panama.

The ship had been modified by adding two extra passenger decks in 1991, which would have made it more unstable in heavy seas and winds. This would only compound the well-known structural weaknesses of roll-on roll-off ferries, or ro-ros.

The sinking of the *Herald of Free Enterprise* at Zeebrugge, Belgium, in 1987, killing 193 people, and the *Estonia* in 1994, while en route to Stockholm, killing 852 people, are only the most well-known examples of the dangers of ro-ros. According to the International Maritime Organisation, in the late 1990s a third of all lives lost at sea were from ro-ros, although they made up only “a small fraction” of the world fleet.

Large doors on these vessels are only just above the waterline and they have no fixed bulkheads, or walls. Their big internal space means that even minor listing can fill them with water, sinking them, especially if cars and trucks move about. Fire can also spread quickly.

David Osler of Lloyd’s List said, “The percentage of this type of ferry involved in this type of disaster is huge.”

He told *Time* magazine, “The consensus in the industry by the mid 1980s was that this type of ship is inherently unstable to the standards they were designed to at that point in time.”

But European owners responded by selling them off to countries where less stringent regulations applied.

Osler continued, “It was a double standard: They are not safe enough for us, they are safe enough to pass on to poorer countries.... Every year this millennium we have seen the capsizing of a roll-on roll-off ferry in the Third World with hundreds of deaths. It’s a bloodbath.”



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