

Egypt: Report on ferry disaster condemns official corruption

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An Egyptian parliamentary committee last week released a preliminary report on last February's Al-Salam Boccaccio 98 ferry disaster in which 1,000 people died. The investigation found that the ferry's owner had failed to meet a series of basic safety standards and condemned "wicked collaboration" between the ship company and officials of President Hosni Mubarak's government.

The Al-Salam Boccaccio 98 sank in the Red Sea on February 3 as it was en route from Saudi Arabia to the Egyptian port of Safaga. Shortly after the ship's departure an electrical fire broke out which crew extinguished with water hoses. According to the parliamentary report, the ferry's drains were blocked, causing an accumulation of water which led to the ferry capsizing. Survivors reported that passengers dived into the water in a desperate attempt to clear paper, plastic bags and other debris from the drains.

The ship was a "roll-on roll-off" ferry, which have notorious safety records and capsize easily if they take on excess water. Of the reported 1,414 passengers on board, just 388 survived.

The parliamentary investigation found that the ferry's drains had not been inspected by the Maritime Safety Board, and that fire extinguishers, which could have been used instead of water to put out the electrical fire, were not working. Other safety failings included lifejackets and life rafts that were unfit for use and a shortage of available winches to lower safety rafts.

The 36-year-old vessel was routinely overloaded with passengers. It was originally licensed in Italy to carry 1,187 people but was permitted to carry up to 2,890 passengers by Egyptian authorities.

The ferry was registered through Panama, a common practice internationally used to bypass safety and employment standards. But even the Panamanian

authorities had instructed it not to sail more than 20 miles from land. According to the parliamentary report, Al-Salam Boccaccio 98, which sank 43 miles from Egypt, obtained licences to operate on international routes from elsewhere, in violation of international agreements.

"The circumstances of the accident and its reasons point to a hideous image of corruption in a utility related to people's lives," the parliamentary committee stated. "The investigations showed that the operation of the ferry confirmed an excessive greed and wilful desire to accumulate money, even at the expense of lives."

The report detailed the close connections between state officials and Mamdouh Ismail, the owner of Al-Salam Boccaccio 98, "which allowed him to evade maritime transport safety regulations."

Ismail is a government-appointed member of Egypt's parliamentary upper-house, the Shura Council, and is chairman of the ruling National Democratic Party's (NDP) office in Heliopolis. According to *Al Ahram Weekly*, he has a close relationship with Zakaria Azmi, Mubarak's chief of staff, which he used to develop his business interests in shipping, hotels and other tourism related industries.

Ismail is also on the board of the Red Sea Ports Authority and according to *Al Ahram Weekly*, "is accused of using his position not only to bypass safety regulations, but to virtually monopolise transport in the Red Sea, giving passengers no other choice than to travel on his company's dangerous vessels."

The government sparked outrage when they permitted Ismail to leave the country ahead of the report's release. He thus evaded possible arrest after being stripped of his parliamentary immunity. Now residing in London, England, the businessman insists that he is

innocent of any wrongdoing and that the Al-Salam Boccaccio 98 was fitted with the necessary safety equipment.

The government's decision to allow him to flee the country indicates that leading officials never want him brought to trial, where further politically damaging revelations of Ismail's operations and high-level connections could emerge. A number of low-ranking officials will likely be made scapegoats for the disaster, while those senior figures in the government and shipping industry that are ultimately responsible will get off scot-free.

"I wouldn't dare call [the report] a step toward accountability," human rights worker and opposition leader Hesham Kassem told the *New York Times*. "We have seen many cases like this that should have been prosecuted properly, and they are shelved."

The parliamentary report, drawn up by 23 members of the NDP-dominated People's Assembly, was careful not to mention President Mubarak by name, nor to directly blame the government for the ferry disaster. A number of opposition politicians also accused NDP operatives of intervening in the investigation to ensure that the language used to criticise state officials in the report was toned down.

The ferry disaster exposed both the deep social divisions within Egyptian society and the isolation of the Mubarak regime. Most of those killed were poor workers and peasants who were returning from Saudi Arabia where they were employed as "guest workers," mostly in the low-paid service and construction industries. With an unemployment rate of more than 20 percent, large numbers of Egyptians are forced to support their families by working in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

At the other end of the scale, multimillionaires such as Mamdouh Ismail cultivate their commercial interests in partnership with Mubarak's corrupt regime. The president's NDP is not a genuine political party but rather an elaborate network of graft and patronage aimed at securing the ruling elite's wealth and power. The deeply unpopular regime is heavily reliant on its security apparatus, which routinely imprisons its opponents without trial, tortures detainees and violently breaks up political demonstrations.

That the parliamentary report into the Al-Salam Boccaccio 98's sinking was not a complete whitewash

reflects the level of popular anger among ordinary Egyptians over the disaster. The government also has to contend with pressure from the Islamist opposition group, the Muslim Brotherhood, which has 88 of the 454 seats in the People's Assembly. The Brotherhood has sought to promote its anti-corruption credentials by focusing on the ferry disaster and its aftermath.

The investigation criticised the delayed rescue efforts which, it admitted, had exacerbated the death toll. Due to a series of still unexplained failures by the authorities to either receive or pass on the ferry's distress signal, Egyptian navy ships and planes only reached the passengers about six to seven hours after the ship went down. Another ferry, also owned by Mamdouh Ismail, was just 25 miles away when it received a signal from one of the lifeboats. The captain, however, was unable to assist the survivors because he feared that his ferry, which was carrying 1,800 passengers, would capsize if he attempted to turn it around.

The report issued a number of criticisms of the government's response to the disaster. Families who waited at the Egyptian port for news of their relatives' fate were not provided with any facilities by the government. Hundreds of grieving family members then clashed with police, chanted anti-government slogans and ransacked the offices of Ismail's Al-Salam Maritime Transport Company.

After the bodies had been recovered, the report noted, "it was up to those who wanted to identify the body of a relative for burial to roam between hospitals and morgues across 10 different cities and thousands of kilometres to go through the faces of the dead."

The Mubarak government has not issued any response to the parliamentary committee's findings.



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