

Hundreds missing after Indonesian ferry sinks

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Nine days after the Indonesian ferry, *Senopati Nusantara* or *Archipeligo Commander*, sank in stormy conditions in the Java Sea, 15 people who had been drifting in a life raft were rescued on Sunday by a passing ship. One of the survivors, an 18-year-old suffering from asthma, died within hours. The others, who had survived by sharing water and emergency rations, were weak and sunburned, but otherwise safe.

This latest group brings the number of survivors to about 245. More than 400 passengers and crew, however, are missing, feared dead. Bad weather and the lack of a precise location for the sinking have hampered rescue efforts. Only 13 bodies have so far been retrieved.

The *Senopati Nusantara* started to sink around midnight on December 30, about 10 hours into a 19-hour trip from Kumai in central Kalimantan to the Javanese city of Semarang. According to rescued passengers, the ship first veered to one side, but took two hours to completely capsize. A government investigator Ruth Simatupang told Associated Press: "I suspect waves entered the car deck over the door and became trapped, making the vessel too heavy and unstable."

The ferry was a "roll on, roll off" or "ro-ro" type which has a poor safety record. In the 1987 sinking of the *Herald of Free Enterprise* in Belgium, the bow doors had not been properly closed before leaving port, resulting in the deaths of nearly 200 people. The subsequent tightening of standards in Europe led to the sale of a number of ro-ro ships to Third World operators. Since then there have been a series of disasters, including the sinking of the *Al-Salam Boccaccio 86* in the Red Sea last February with the loss of hundreds of lives.

The *Senopati Nusantara* was built in Japan in 1990

and was licensed to carry 850 people. According to the ship's manifest, there were 628 passengers and 57 crew on board at the time. The actual number may have been higher as official manifests in Indonesia are notoriously inaccurate. It had two lifeboats, 47 air rafts capable of caring 1,175 people and 1,125 life jackets.

Indonesian officials have blamed bad weather for the sinking. But the explanation begs the question: why did the vessel put to sea? Passengers reported that the 10 hours of the trip had been in heavy seas. National transport safety commentator Hendro Wijono told the *Australian* that those responsible for the ferry's passage should have known that it could not survive the huge seas that sank it.

In the week following the disaster, a series of articles suddenly appeared in the *Jakarta Post* reporting the decisions of port authorities to cancel ferry services and issue bad weather warnings. On Saturday, sea transportation director general Harijogi told the newspaper that precautions were being taken. "We realise that safety is a necessity and not just an obligation. In November, we issued a bad weather alert to all captains."

Obviously, however, the authorities did not prevent the *Senopati Nusantara* from leaving port. Indonesian Transport Community chairman Bambang Susantono openly declared: "There is more demand for sea trips than the supply of ships or ferried. This has encouraged the captains to neglect safety measures because of overloading."

Survivors reported that the scenes on board the sinking vessel were chaotic. The crew did not appear to have been trained to deal with the emergency they faced. Not enough life jackets or rafts could be found and passengers fought over those available.

Wuluyo told Reuters: "Suddenly the lights went off

and it became dark. The ship's crew tossed life jackets. Some could not get any but I got one. I tried to get into a rubber boat but many people also did the same thing, so the rubber boat was torn."

Many people were trapped when the waves crashed over the deck. "I heard people screaming from the second floor 'open the door! Help!' Hundreds must have died down there," Syahrul told Associated Press from his hospital bed. Other survivors said many elderly people were not able to get into the rubber boats and drowned.

Some survivors were found floating in the sea. A group was discovered on an unmanned oil rig 190 kilometres from where the ferry sunk. The rough seas made it difficult for rescuers to search the area and to pull people from the ocean. The rescue effort was also disorganised and confused because of poor communications. The captain radioed port authorities to warn that the ship was in trouble, but contact was lost and the exact position of the sinking is unknown. It seems the ship had no emergency beacon.

The tragedy is just the latest in a series of ferry disasters in Indonesia. The vessels, which are often poorly equipped, overcrowded and lacking basic safety features, are a common, relatively cheap means of transport within the Indonesian archipelago. What governs their operations is profit, not any consideration for the comfort or safety of passengers.

Major ferry disasters involving more than 500 deaths in each case occurred in 2000 and 2003. The two ferries were overloaded with refugees fleeing sectarian violence in the eastern Indonesian province of Maluku. In 1999, the cargo ship Artha Rimba sank and drowned around 300 people. It was travelling from West Kalimantan to Sumatra and none of the passengers were on the ship's manifest.

Senopati Nusantara was the second ferry to sink in two days. The previous night another ferry sank in rough seas off Sumatra.

At the same time, Indonesian authorities are still looking for the passenger plane, Adam Air Flight KI-574, which disappeared in bad weather on January 1. The Boeing 737 set out with 102 people on board from Java for the North Sulawesi capital of Manado but contact was lost half-way into the two-hour trip. Nearly 3,000 soldiers, police and civilians are reportedly involved in the search over dense jungle and in nearby

seas.



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