

More than 700 feared dead in Philippine ferry disaster

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The MV Princess of the Stars, one of the largest passenger ferries in the Philippines, keeled over in raging seas whipped up by typhoon Fenshen last Saturday. More than 850 passengers and crew were on board, including at least 20 children and 33 infants.

Despite the efforts of rescuers, few survivors have been found—43 as of yesterday, according to the Coast Guard. Philippine Civil Defence chief Anthony Golez put the figure slightly higher at 57. Rescue divers yesterday reported finding hundreds of bodies inside the upturned hull. Navy spokesman, Lieutenant Colonel Edgar Arevalo told the media that the “priority now is to extricate the bodies”.

The vessel, owned by Sulpicio Lines, departed from Manila last Friday, bound for Cebu City despite storm warnings from the national weather bureau. It ran headlong the next day into the typhoon, which had shifted from its northeasterly path. Waves driven by winds of 115 kilometres an hour, gusting up to 150 kilometres an hour, battered the ship. By noon the same day, according to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, the Southern Tagalog Coast Guard Station had picked up a distress signal from the ferry, “saying it had engine trouble and was listing”.

A crew member who survived, Renato Lanorias, later reported the ship sank in just 15 minutes after the strong winds and huge waves apparently broke the lashing that held the cargo. The swift capsizing left most passengers with no time to jump free or clamber into the ship’s 14 life rafts. The ship ran aground off Sibuyan Island in the central Philippines.

The government moved quickly to find a scapegoat. On Sunday, speaking via phone from the US, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo publicly berated Coast Guard chief, Vice Admiral Wilfredo Tamayo, for allowing the ship to depart Manila amid the storm warnings.

Tamayo, however, responded by pointing out that current regulations allowed large ships to disregard storm warnings below signal no. 3. The Princess of the Stars was over 23,000 tonnes.

Arroyo has demanded a review of the maritime regulations. Justice Minister Raul Gonzales continued the offensive yesterday by suggesting that the Coast Guard and Marina (Maritime Industry Authority) be excluded from the official inquiry. The government slapped a ban on Sulpicio Line ships leaving port, but according to Agence France Press the company was still selling tickets, saying it had not been formally notified of the decision.

Arroyo’s display of concern is a sham. The maritime regulations are in line with the systematic deregulation of the domestic shipping industry under the current and previous administrations. Since the late 1980s, chronically under-funded and politically-influenced government agencies have essentially allowed the industry to regulate itself in relation to safety standards and seaworthiness.

According to an ABS-CBN article, a 1998 Senate investigation into the sinking of another Sulpicio Line ship, the Doña Marilyn, revealed that “ship inspection was not as thorough and only limited to the submission of required documents. No inspections were done [to determine] whether the ships were adequately equipped or whether the storage and lashing of cargo were in order”.

The end result is an appalling safety record, with an average of more than 200 accidents every year. Since 1987, there have been 10 major ferry disasters in the Philippines, in which a total of more than 5,000 people have died. On Saturday, another transport ship Lake Paoy also sunk during the storm leaving three people dead.

Yet, as Bob Cottie from the *Maritime Casebook* website noted, “not a single ferry company or ship owner has been brought to book in any incident in the Philippines”. Neither had the Philippines “lodged a single maritime casualty investigative report with the International Maritime Organisation” as required by the terms of its membership. Investigative reports from the board of inquiries have not been made public.

Gisela Bichler-Robertson, director of the Crime Prevention Analysis Lab, pointed out in a 2001 paper that the following are “generally accepted as being indicative of corporate attempts to maximise profit at the expense of safety including, but not limited to: registration with a flag of convenience (FOC), vessel age (over 20 years old), poor vessel maintenance, inoperable auxiliary equipment, loading beyond legal capacity, and failure to keep an accurate manifest.”

The domestic shipping industry is allowed to operate vessels up to 30 years old. MV Princess of the Stars was 24 years old. Republic Act No. 9295 signed by Arroyo even provides tax incentives for shipping lines to purchase ships up to 15-years of age.

Sulpicio Lines has a notoriously bad safety record, including shoddy maintenance and overloading of its ships. Since 1987, four of its ships have sunk. The worst tragedy—that of the Doña Paz in 1987—resulted in more than 4,300 deaths. The Doña Marilyn sank in 1988 with 300 deaths, and in 1998 the Princess of the Orient went down, killing 200 people.

A board of inquiry into the Doña Paz sinking found that the ship was overloaded by more 2,500 passengers, had no radio and its lifejackets were locked away. The Doña Marilyn struck a typhoon and its engines reportedly failed. Forty-six survivors were found not to have been listed on the ship’s manifest. In the latest tragedy last weekend, 9 of the 42 currently listed survivors were not on the official manifest.

According to the *Manila Times*, Sulpicio Lines posted a net loss in 2006 of \$5.31 million. The company attributed the result to a 14.7 percent drop in passenger revenues. From \$24.65 million in 2005, it earned just \$19.96 million in 2006.

Arroyo ally and house speaker, Prospero Nograles, issued a press statement on Monday demanding that Sulpicio Lines’ authority to operate be cancelled. “Why is Sulpicio, which has the worst sea safety record in the Philippines, still being allowed to operate?” he

added.

Accident

The answer is grim but simple: under capitalism, profits come before safety. And for all its present posturing, once the political storm has blown over, the Arroyo administration will do nothing to fundamentally alter those priorities.



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