

At least 200 drown in latest Indonesian ferry disaster

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The Indonesian government has scaled back efforts to find survivors of the country's latest ferry disaster, declaring there is little hope of rescuing any of the estimated 230 passengers still unaccounted for since the Teratai Prima, a 10-year-old, 700-tonne ferry capsized in a monsoonal storm on January 11.

Smaller vessels were ordered to give up the search on Wednesday and only four navy warships and two patrol boats continued the operation. "We are facing very bad weather and rough seas. We don't want to take any risks," transport ministry maritime official Sunaryo said.

According to the official news agency, Antara, only 41 survivors had been rescued by Wednesday, and two bodies found.

The ferry was sailing from Pare-Pare, on the western coast of Sulawesi, for Samarinda in East Kalimantan. It was seven hours into the trip when it was hit by cyclonic winds, heavy rain and waves four metres high before dawn on Sunday morning.

When the Teratai Prima departed the weather was calm, but Indonesia's Meteorological and Geophysical Bureau had warned since January 9 of huge waves due to the annual monsoon season and a full moon.

Most passengers were probably asleep when the ferry sank. A survivor, Muhammad Yusuf, 38, told AFP: "I jumped into the sea before the ship turned upside down. I saw a number of people were panicking and screaming for help as the ferry was listing and lost its balance."

The ferry reportedly had 12 inflatable life rafts. But there were not enough lifeboats, according to Rusdi, 18, who survived by hanging on to a long stick of bamboo. "I saw 10 people manage to jump into a lifeboat but then it flipped

over as it couldn't support them."

Another distraught survivor, Sampara Daeng Gassing, 35, who clung to a tyre for two hours in the storm, said: "People were screaming, 'Help, help!' ... I lost hold of my [9-year-old] son and my father-in-law when a big wave hit me."

One survivor, Syaiful, described the panic on the ship as it went down, with children screaming as people flung themselves into the sea, the *Suara Pembaruan* reported.

It appears the ferry was carrying well over its capacity. It had 250 passengers and 17 crew according to the manifest, but Bambang Ervan, a transport ministry spokesman, said at least 103 more could have been on board.

Desperate relatives waiting at search coordination centres on Sulawesi Island complained that the government was not doing enough. About 50 people protested at the crisis centre in Majene, one of the towns closest to where the Teratai Prima sank. Some of the protestors had pooled funds to hire three fishing boats to launch their own search.

"We are not satisfied with the search and rescue. We want to look ourselves," Azwar, who had family members on the ferry, told *Detik.com* news portal. Abet, who had 63 relatives and neighbours from one village listed as missing, said: "They [the authorities] blamed bad weather for stopping the search yesterday but how come fishermen still managed to find survivors? Why didn't the rescue teams find any?"

In a bid to defuse the situation, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who faces a re-election battle this year, held a media conference on Wednesday, where he instructed officials to "continue the investigation in a comprehensive way, and do not soften because we have to protect the people".

Yudhoyono said a check should be made on the vessel's safety equipment immediately without waiting for the results of an investigation by the National Committee for

Transportation Safety (KNKT). He urged officials to "forbid all vessels lacking complete safety equipment from leaving ports," Antara reported.

The government also promised to compensate families \$US2,400, or roughly twice an average annual salary in Indonesia, for each victim of the tragedy.

The disaster is just the latest in a long line of ferry sinkings across the archipelago. In 1999, the cargo ship Artha Rimba sank, and around 300 people drowned. The ship was travelling from West Kalimantan to Sumatra and none of the passengers were on its manifest. Two ferry disasters in 2000 and 2003 each involved more than 500 deaths. Both ferries were overloaded. In December 2006, a ship with 638 people aboard sank off East Java. Only 230 people survived.

All the indications are that the government is planning to blame the Teratai Prima's captain and owners for the January 11 disaster, as a means of diverting attention from the deeper causes of the ongoing ferry sinkings, and the government's own failure to act.

Transport Minister Jusman Syafi'i Djamal said on Monday that a preliminary investigation showed the ferry capsized after it was hit by waves, but there would be an investigation into why the captain set sail despite warnings about bad weather and why the ship was not properly equipped with safety gear.

In 2007, after a number of air disasters, Yudhoyono and Djamal promised a drastic shake-up of aviation and maritime safety, with a "roadmap to zero accidents". Yet Djamal admitted at a press conference on Monday that only "40 to 50 percent" of the reforms pledged in maritime safety in the past four years had been carried out.

Djamal said the appointment of harbourmasters and port authorities were examples of the measures yet to be introduced. The London-based *Financial Times* commented: "Experts in the maritime sector believe the minister's figures for action taken are probably an overestimation." The newspaper quoted a port operator: "If accidents don't happen it's by luck, not by design."

Indonesia's parliament last May passed a sea transport law and privatised port management, but no regulations have been published, preventing the legislation from being implemented. Surveillance and enforcement responsibilities have been passed on to local ports officials who have received no training and lack the resources to monitor all

boats.

Abdul Gani, director-general of sea transport at the transport ministry, acknowledged that there is still overloading and reckless disregard for rules and regulations.

Private ferry operators are driven by the need to make profits, and they know that the government will not threaten the profitability of the industry. Government officials have said they might suspend the owner's licence, but nothing will be done to bring the infrastructure or safety up to standard.

The transportation problems have become so serious that other countries have warned their citizens not to travel in Indonesia. After a Garuda passenger plane crashed at Yogyakarta in Central Java in March 2007, killing more than 20 passengers, the European Union banned Indonesian airlines from its airspace.

Despite the threat to the tourist industry, only cosmetic changes have been made, because it would take tens of billions of dollars to bring Indonesian infrastructure up to standard, cutting deeply into profits.

While European travellers have been warned, for tens of millions of people in Indonesia, ferries are their only means of transportation around the country's 17,500 islands. The poor have no choice but to risk their lives because they cannot afford any alternative.



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