

Grief turns to anger over Tongan ferry tragedy

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Grief stricken and increasingly angry relatives are camping outside the Tongan government-owned Shipping Company of Polynesia in the capital Nuku'alofa awaiting news about passengers on the ferry Princess Ashika, which sank on August 5. Tonga, an archipelago of 169 small islands about 2,000 kilometres north east of New Zealand, has a population of just over 110,000.

The Princess Ashika was travelling from Nuku'alofa to Ha'afeva, in the Nomuka Islands group, when it sank moments after issuing a mayday call, reportedly going down in less than a minute. It has now been located in 35 metres of water 86 kilometres northeast of the capital. The 41-year-old ferry had been plying Tongan waters for only a few weeks, as a stop-gap measure ahead of a new vessel coming into service in 2011.

The number of people thought to have died has risen to 95, out of the estimated 149 passengers and crew on the ferry. Only two bodies have been recovered so far. Most of those drowned are believed to be women and children who were sleeping below decks when the ferry overturned.

The cause of the sinking is yet to be determined but one crewman said the captain had warned of rough seas approaching with less than a minute's notice. One survivor told the local media that he woke to find the ferry rocking violently and waves breaking over the lower deck. Timber cargo had apparently shifted to one side, unbalancing the ferry and capsizing it. Those on board had only seconds to react.

Marine investigators are examining whether the ferry may have been overcrowded and overloaded. There are also claims that it was not certified or safe to sail.

The Princess Ashika was brought from Fiji to replace a previous passenger ferry, the Olovaha, which was no longer safe. However, the replacement was ten years older

than the vessel it replaced and had reportedly taken a month to travel from Fiji on its delivery voyage. Tongan journalist Pesi Fonua said local residents had a "bad feeling" about the boat and had not wanted to use it but had no choice because air travel was too expensive.

Ofa Gутtenbeil-Likiliki, executive director for the Tongan national centre for women and children, told Radio New Zealand there had been many unofficial reports about the Princess Ashika being unsafe. "There is a lot of anger around the wharf because there are unanswered questions ... if the boat wasn't unsafe why did it go out, why did the government purchase it?" she said.

A member of New Zealand's Tongan community in Wellington, Valeti Finau, who is mourning the death of three of her extended family in the sinking, told the *Dominion Post* that the accident was tragic but "not surprising". Finau was in Tonga when the ferry was delivered in June. "The Tongans are not stupid," she said, "they were looking at it and saying, not only is it old and rusty, it's designed for lagoons and lakes, not for the open sea."

Adding to the growing anger in Tonga over the tragedy was news that the monarch, King Tupou V, had departed for an extended Scottish holiday. One official said "people were incredulous and astounded" that the king had left for almost three months even as rescuers were scouring the seas for survivors.

Brian Heagney, who runs a dive shop in Nuku'alofa, told the *New Zealand Herald* that "the mood in the entire kingdom is one of anger." "Very large crowds have camped outside the [shipping company] offices basically baying for blood." He said information was being passed on to family members "painfully" slowly and that many people were still not aware whether their loved ones were dead or alive. A limited list of the rescued 27 crew members and 23 passengers was only issued two days

after the sinking.

Tonga's transport minister has been accused of allowing the Princess Ashika to sail even though he was aware it was not seaworthy. Opposition MP Akilisi Pohiva said people were "extremely angry" as they had tried to stop the government from buying the rusting boat, which was "only good for scrap".

Pohiva warned that the government's refusal to listen, and the lack of proper government accountability, was triggering increasing tensions "not unlike what we've seen here before"—a reference to the November 2006 riots in which Nuku'alofa's town centre was looted and razed by demonstrators protesting the corrupt and privileged royal family's stranglehold on the government and society.

Prime Minister Feleti Sevele, who was attending the Pacific Islands Forum in Australia when the vessel sank, claimed that the ferry had a seaworthiness certificate and marine insurance cover. He said other ships had capsized in the area, pointing to rough conditions at the time, and "peculiarities" in the currents.

Sevele's reaction is symptomatic of the contempt for the conditions of life of ordinary Tongans rife among the local ruling elite and its sponsors in Australia and New Zealand.

The inadequate provision of shipping in the region, amid the world's largest ocean mass, is bound up with a history of imperialist domination, exploitation and economic underdevelopment. The current disaster comes on the back of the loss of another ferry in Kiribati last month that left 33 people dead. It is the third major marine tragedy in Tonga—including one sinking more than 15 years ago in which 60 to 65 passengers were lost—and is deepening tensions throughout the small South Pacific nation.



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