

Another Indonesian ferry disaster claims dozens of lives

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At least 29 people are dead and many missing after an Indonesian ferry sank off the Riau Islands province at about 9.15 am on Sunday. Navy boats and local fishermen have reportedly rescued 255 passengers. The tragedy occurred near the maritime boundary with Singapore, about 800 kilometres northwest of Jakarta.

Rescue efforts have been hampered by high seas. The rough conditions have also prevented divers searching the wreck for those feared trapped inside.

There are reports that up to 400 people may have been on the boat, which had a maximum authorised capacity of 268 passengers and crew. The 147-tonne fast ferry, the Dumai Express 10, left the port of Beton Sekupang on Batam Island at 7.45 am and was just 30 minutes into its journey to Dumai in Sumatra when the fine weather suddenly worsened.

Waves of up to four metres apparently damaged the bow section, cracking the hull and causing the vessel to sink. According to the vessel's master Johan Napitupulu, the ferry sank within 27 minutes. He claimed that reports about overcrowding were untrue and that the sudden weather shift was responsible for the sinking. The captain said he had received no warning from authorities about any expected dangerous weather.

The Indonesian Meteorology and Geophysics Agency (BMG) issued a warning on Sunday to harbours, transport agencies and crisis centres throughout the archipelago that weather and consequent wave conditions were unsafe for all shipping. However, the warning was not in time for the Dumai Express 10.

There are indications that this was not the only vessel unprepared for the sudden weather change. The *Jakarta Post* reported that two other vessels, the Dumai Express 5 and the KM Marina Baru, carrying hundreds of passengers, ran aground nearby on the way from Batam to Moro Island after being battered by high waves. There were no fatalities.

The infrastructure throughout the ports in the country's 17,000 islands is poor and the BMG's own resources are inadequate to forewarn against weather-related disasters. According to a report in the *Jakarta Globe*, the agency needs a minimum spread of 40 weather radars to provide timely warnings, but has only 19 operating.

Rescue efforts are being hampered because no one is sure how many passengers were on the vessel. Riau Islands disaster management coordinating task force secretary Naharuddin said the search operations would continue for seven days, because "survivors had reported many people still missing after the accident".

Estimates of the missing vary from 17 to 27 but this may be far short of the actual number. It is common practice for owners to overload ferries and poor enforcement means regulations are often flouted.

Riau Islands police chief Brigadier General Pudji Hartanto initially put the number of passengers at 292, despite the manifest showing only 228. Those not on the manifest were thought to include children. According to a later AFP report, local police said as many as 400 could have been aboard.

The *Jakarta Post* reported the case of one young

woman who escorted her mother to seat number 213 but after the incident found her mother was not listed on the manifest. “Rosida, 24, said she panicked when she found out her 50-year-old mother Nurli Saragih was not on the ship’s manifest. ‘This morning I accompanied my mother to seat No. 213, but she was not included in the passenger list. Why?’ Rosida said.”

She was one of many relatives to make this discovery. The Beton Sekupang Port was packed with passengers’ family members, anxious to know the fate of loved ones, many of whom were not listed.

Survivors said the ship was overloaded with people and luggage, and told of fighting with the ferry’s crew over the distribution of life jackets as the Dumai Express was swamped by two-metre high waves.

One survivor quoted by AFP said that he thought there could have been 350 on board. High school teacher Amir Azli said he saw at least 50 people without tickets on the top deck. Factory worker Zulfitri said people were standing on the first floor because there were no seats.

Overcrowding made escape difficult. Survivor Riki, quoted in an Antara news agency report, said he saw some people jump without life jackets. He was able to escape by breaking a window. “It was too fast ... and the ship crew did not tell us about the situation at all. We only managed to get out after I broke the glass window on the right side. That was the only way because there were many people jostling for the doors.”

Transport officials have promised an investigation into the incident. National Transport Safety Committee representatives were sent to the scene of the sinking. In the past, Jakarta has been quick to blame ferry captains and owners but promises to reform the industry have not materialised.

Indonesian ferry accidents have killed hundreds of people in recent years. In January, more than 200 were killed when a 700-tonne ferry capsized on the way from Sulawesi to Kalimantan. In December 2006, 400 were lost in a sinking off East Java. In 2000 and 2003, two ferry disasters both involved hundreds of deaths.

Poor local infrastructure, official corruption and a lack of safety enforcement in the large and profitable island ferry business mean that little is likely to change. The lives of millions of poorer Indonesians forced to rely on the relatively cheap form of transportation will remain in danger.



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