

Scores die in Bangladeshi ferry disaster

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The death toll in last Friday's ferry accident in southern Bangladesh reached 80 yesterday as six more bodies were retrieved from the MV Coco-4. Many more remain missing. With no record of the exact number of passengers the actual number of dead may never be known.

Packed with hundreds of passengers, the MV Coco-4 left Dhaka early in the afternoon, and arrived at Nazirput terminal in Lalmohan, 104 kilometres south of the capital, just before midnight. According to some survivors, the vessel hit a shoal as it approached the dock, splitting the hull. As panicked passengers scrambled to get off, the vessel tipped and partially sank in the Tetulia River.

The ferry operators compounded the disaster by insisting on collecting ticket money before people could leave. The vessel had stopped 18 metres from the shore and one wooden plank was the only means for getting off. A collapsible gate that could have provided another exit was kept locked.

Many of the victims were women and children. Most were poor people who use Bangladesh's cheap but notoriously unsafe ferries to reach many locations. Last Friday the ferries were particularly overcrowded as many people were travelling to their home towns to celebrate the Islamic festival of Eid Ul-Alha on Saturday.

The rescue operation only began on Sunday morning, more than 36 hours after the accident. One man told the media: "They are always slow in dealing with emergencies, be it a ferry accident or a train crash or whatever." He was waiting for his son and daughter-in-law, who were among the missing.

The MV Coco-4 was grossly overcrowded, with around 1,500 people on board. It was only registered to carry 600 passengers by day and 446 at night, according to district authorities. Mohammed Ripon, who survived by jumping into the water, told reporters: "There was no empty space in the ship. Every inch was filled with passengers." Another survivor Umme Kulsum Mittu said: "The law enforcement agencies in Dhaka should never have allowed such an obviously overcrowded vessel to sail, especially when the government has repeatedly pledged to stop this from happening."

Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) chairman M Abdul Maleque Miah blamed overloading and mismanagement as the main reasons for the accident and blasted ferry owners for their callousness. However, the BIWTA is responsible for ferry safety and turns a blind eye to overcrowding. The authority suspended three officials for negligence, but is unlikely to address the broader issues.

The BITWA is also responsible for rescue operations but has only two outmoded salvage vessels—the MV Hamza and MV Rustam, which were bought in 1964 and 1983 respectively. The usual life of a salvage vessel is about 20 years.

In an attempt to deflect public anger, the government appointed a five-member committee to conduct an inquiry. Like the many previous investigations into ferry disasters, this one will be a whitewash. A few scapegoats will be singled out, but the underlying causes, even if addressed, will be ignored by government.

In 2000, the High Court ruled on a public interest writ by lawyer Tanzib-ul Alam and directed the government

to ensure that passenger ferries carried lifejackets and other safety apparatus, and ended overloading. Alam told the *New Age* on Monday that none of these measures has been implemented.

The government reported to the High Court in August 2003 that 39 measures had been implemented in line with the court's orders and the recommendations of various committees. Ruling on a supplementary writ filed by Consumer Association of Bangladesh secretary general Quazi Faruque, the court ordered the government to document its claims. "No such documents have yet been submitted to the court by the government," Faruque told the *New Age*.

The country's extensive river transport system is in a state of disintegration due to the failure of successive governments to deal with the lack of proper infrastructure, poor ferry maintenance and low safety standards, which are rarely enforced. The rivers are badly silted due to the lack of dredging, making ferry travel even more hazardous.

The Alliance for Safe River Routes recently released an independent study blaming the government's "weakness" in enforcing existing laws as a major cause of repeated ferry disasters. The study found that during the past 34 years, accidents involving some 500 ferries had claimed more than 4,000 lives. Spokesman Aminur Rasul said more than 300 people died in accidents in the first six months of this year and accused authorities of not taking adequate measures.

Half of the approximately 20,000 passengers and cargo vessels plying Bangladesh's rivers are not registered and almost 70 percent do not meet prescribed design standards. Most crew members are not adequately trained, navigation aids are not used and safety regulations are frequently violated. An article in the *New Age* in June reported that 30 percent of all travel is by river, but "80 percent of the river routes are now reportedly risky for water transport".

About 60 million people use river transport in Bangladesh every year—more than 100,000 every day. Most of the travellers, and therefore most of the victims of ferry disasters, are poor. In a country where more

than half of children live in poverty and more than a quarter of all households face food insecurity, the ferries are one of the few affordable means of transport. The latest latest tragedy again exposes the callous indifference of authorities to their plight.



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