

More than 30 die in Bangladesh ferry disaster

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23 December 2010

At least 37 people—all women and children—are known to have drowned after a ferry collided with a sand-laden cargo vessel and sank in north-eastern Bangladesh on December 19. The country's latest ferry disaster occurred on the Surma River in the Sunamganj district, about 175 kilometres from the capital, Dhaka.

Nearly 150 people were on board when the accident happened. Around 40 passengers swam ashore, while locals rescued several others. About 18 people are still missing.

The boat, packed with the stone quarry workers and their families, was travelling from Sunamganj to the neighbouring Kishoreganj district. The collision occurred at 9.30 p.m., when many passengers were sleeping. A survivor, Ajman Miah, who lost his children and wife, told Agence France Presse (AFP): “The windows of the boat were shut due to the cold wind. I heard a loud noise and the boat overturned before I could realise what happened.”

Golam Kidria, a police officer in Sunamganj, told the BBC: “Many male passengers who were sitting on the roof of the boat managed to swim to safety, while those passengers, mostly women and children, who were inside the cabin drowned in the river.”

It was reported that neither vessel even had a light. While officials simply blamed “poor visibility” for the collision, the tragedy underscores the official disregard for the basic safety of large numbers of ordinary people who rely on ferries as a means of transport.

Nearby fishermen and villagers, using torches, rushed to rescue survivors from the water. The local administration attempted to justify its failure to launch a timely rescue operation on the basis that the area was

“remote”. In reality, boat tragedies are far from unknown in the area. In November 2009, a boat sank in the same vicinity, and 46 people were killed.

An editorial in the *Daily Sun* on December 20 admitted that there was no proper system for rescuers to respond to an emergency on short notice. The editorial said “delayed and routine rescue operations” accounted for the loss of lives. “It seems the norm is to recover only dead bodies,” the newspaper commented.

In order to contain public anger, the district government formed a five-member “probe committee” to investigate the accident. Its initial finding blamed “overcrowding” and “poor visibility on the river”. Local government administrator Mohammad Abul Hashem told the AFP: “It appears that boat was overloaded. People were crammed on its deck.”

Clearly, insufficient lighting—a known cause of previous boat disasters—has not been addressed in the ferry and boat industry. According to the Bangladesh navy, more than 95 percent of the country's many small and medium-sized boats do not meet minimum official safety standards, including life boats or life jackets, and lights for night navigation. In order to make money, boat owners often cram in many more passengers than the boats are designed to carry.

The two boats that collided are likely to be among the 80,000 unlicensed boats operating on the country's rivers, taking advantage of lax government regulation and monitoring, compared to just 12,000 registered vessels.

Successive national governments are centrally responsible for the continuing ferry tragedies. There have generally been media calls for the present Awami

League government to apply more strict laws to prevent boat disasters, when it is obvious that the government has failed to address the safety issues, let alone the underlying social causes.

A *Daily Star* editorial on December 20 lamely declared: “We are constrained to say that there is lack of proactive response on the part of the government to ensure that such accidents are averted. Under no circumstances should a craft that does not meet the standards be allowed to take to the waters. There must also be strict load control, and the defaulters must be severely penalised.”

Boats are a crucial means of transport in Bangladesh, because much of the country is a delta, criss-crossed by dozens of rivers, with few decent roads. Inland water transport employs approximately 150,000 workers, and handles 32 percent of cargo and 72 million passengers each year.

Boat workers, who are extremely poorly paid, went on strike for three days in November 2009. They ended the strike only after the government and the water transport owners association assured them of a proper pay scale. In May this year, countrywide strikes broke out in protest after a tripartite meeting of the government, the vessels owners and the trade unions announced it would “double” the minimum wage to 2,850 taka a month—far less than the 5,000 taka (\$US73) workers had demanded. The Bangladesh Noujan Sramik Federation called off the strikes and accepted the basic wage structure announced by the government on May 16.

Low wages and appalling working conditions go hand in hand with the unsafe and overcrowded boats for passengers, most of whom are also impoverished workers and farmers.

Because of the government’s indifference to the lives and safety of working people, there has been an ongoing toll of ferry fatalities in recent years. Just one week before the deadly November 2009 incident near the scene of the present accident, at least 85 people drowned when an overloaded triple-decker ferry capsized off Bhola Island. As many as 206 people died

in six boat accidents during 2009. It is estimated that more than 6,215 people, mostly poor women and children, were killed in 517 major ferry disasters during the 32 years to November 2009.

These deaths are part of the appalling social conditions of the Bangladeshi working class and the rural poor, who have no choice but to use the unsafe, overcrowded ferries to travel long distances, just as millions of garment workers in the country have been forced to work for long hours and low wages in unsafe sweatshops. On both fronts, the Awami League government’s overriding concern is to drive down employers’ costs and boost business profits in order to attract global investment.



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