Over 100 feared dead in Papua New Guinea ferry disaster

Oliver Campbell
4 February 2012

More than 100 people are missing, feared dead, after a ferry sank off the north-east coast of mainland Papua New Guinea (PNG) on Thursday morning. The MV Rabaul Queen was travelling from Kimbe, on New Britain Island, to Lae, the second largest city in PNG.

Searchers found only one survivor on Friday, a day after rescuing 246 people. Media reports have indicated that around 360 people were on board, but some survivors said there may have been as many as 500 passengers. Rescuers fear that at least 100 people were trapped in the sinking boat, which now lies deep underwater. Many of the passengers were children and students returning to Lae to begin the new school year.

Officials said rescue attempts had been hampered by large swells and strong winds. The ferry sank just 16 kilometres from shore, but the rescue efforts appeared limited. Authorities instructed merchant vessels in the area to go to the scene, and they seem to have been responsible for many of the rescues.

Survivors recounted chaotic scenes when the ferry was struck by large waves. Alice Kakamara, who had been on the top deck with her 11-year-old nephew, told reporters: “The sea was really rough, windy, big waves. The boat titled once, then twice, then three times. There was oil everywhere…We found a lifeboat, but it was sinking...” She and her nephew survived, but Kakamara was being treated in hospital after inhaling toxic fumes from the wrecked ferry.

Passengers reported losing multiple family members. Ruth Kauffman, the Médecins Sans Frontière coordinator in Lae, where survivors were taken, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* : “Everyone I spoke to had lost someone. Wives lost husbands, parents their children, brothers and sisters were missing. It was a profoundly distressing scene.” Kauffman said few young children had been rescued. “Mothers talked about having to let go of their young children. And the youngest child here in Lae would be seven—the women just couldn’t hold onto their babies for that long.”

Government officials have suggested that weather conditions and the age of the ferry may have been factors in the sinking. PNG’s National Weather Service chief, Sam Maiha, told the *Post-Courier* that shipping agencies had been warned to keep ships moored because of strong winds. One of the ship’s engines reportedly failed, and the vessel was running on just one engine when it sank.

It appears that overcrowding contributed to the tragedy. Local residents said they have had longstanding concerns about overcrowding on the 22-year-old ferry. The ferry, owned by Peter Sharp, whose brother chairs the National Maritime Safety Authority (NMSA), has reportedly operated the same route for 11 years.

The vessel was licensed to carry just 310 passengers. According to media reports, Rabaul Shipping, the ferry operator, originally told police that 248 people were on board. The company initially failed to provide the vessel’s manifest, which should have a list of all passengers. On Thursday, Captain Nurur Rahman, the acting head of the NMSA, told reporters he had not seen the manifest, but the number of passengers was “likely around 300.” Only on Friday did Rabaul Shipping confirm that at least 350 passengers had been on board, plus 12 crew members.

Any serious rescue attempt would have required, as its starting point, a correct figure of the number of missing passengers. Samson Siguyaru, Police Senior Inspector of the Kimbe province, told *ABC News*: “It is pretty frustrating on the side of the rescuers because they need that information while they are conducting the rescue.”

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Rabaul Shipping's office in Kimbe was pelted with rocks by some relatives of missing passengers on Thursday, angered that the company was not releasing information about who was on board.

Recent years have seen two serious incidents involving ships owned by NMSA chairman Hamish Sharp, Peter Sharp's brother. In 2006, engines caught fire on the MV Sealark, a passenger ship, and two Philippine workers received third-degree burns while the ship was berthed. The ship was sunk in the harbour outside Lae, resulting in an oil spill. In 2008, the MV San Pedro, a cargo ship, sank as a result of a hole in the side of the engine room.

PNG Prime Minister Peter O'Neil attempted to placate anger over the conditions that led to the disaster. In a veiled reference to lax standards, he promised an investigation, saying: "We need to bring some safety measures back into this industry." Any official investigation, however, will likely seek to cover-up the responsibility of the company and the government.

In neighbouring Australia, the government was anxious to declare its support for the rescue and relief effort in Australia's former colony. Prime Minister Julia Gillard held a doorstop media conference on Thursday to describe the ferry's sinking as "a major tragedy." She said Australia had responded to PNG's requests for assistance.

Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd issued a statement yesterday, declaring: "Australia stands side-by-side with Papua New Guinea at this difficult time." The actual assistance provided, however, was limited. Three Australian military aircraft were dispatched. Rudd said the Australian High Commission in Port Moresby had arranged for emergency supplies in Lae to be available for survivors, and was working closely with local aid organisations.

Today's editorial in the *Australian* pointed to the geo-strategic considerations behind the show of concern. After cursorily mentioning the ferry disaster, the editorial turned to its real message. It criticised Rudd for not having taken a more active role in resolving PNG's ongoing constitutional crisis, in which O'Neill has defied a Supreme Court ruling to reinstate his predecessor Michael Somare.

"Given the recent leadership instability in PNG—namely Michael Somare's flouting of the supremacy of parliament, which duly elected Peter O'Neill as his successor as Prime Minister—it is unfortunate that Australia's relationship with PNG has been allowed to fade, reflecting a disengagement that began with independence in 1975," the newspaper stated.

O'Neill is more closely aligned with Australia and the United States than Somare, who had adopted a "look north" policy. Somare's orientation toward China had aroused sharp opposition in Washington, where the Obama administration accused China of undermining American interests in the resource-rich and strategically located nation. It is these calculations, not the plight of the ferry victims, that have dominated the official Australian response.

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