

Two hundred feared dead in Indian ferry disaster

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Around 200 people are feared dead after a ferry sank in the north-eastern Indian state of Assam late on Monday afternoon. Police have said that 103 bodies, including women and children, had been found so far. Up to 100 others are missing.

The overcrowded and dilapidated ferry was caught in a sudden storm amidst torrential, pre-monsoon rains. It split in two and sank in the fast-flowing waters of the Brahmaputra River. The accident happened close to where the river enters Bangladesh. The ferry had been overloaded with about 350 passengers, exceeding its operating capacity of 225, and there were no lifejackets.

About 150 passengers reportedly managed to swim to safety or were rescued. One of the survivors, Arun Kalita, a 30-year-old road construction worker, said: "I could hear many people screaming for God's help but it was a turbulent river and the storm was very severe ... No one could come and rescue them."

Another survivor, 35-year-old villager Taleb Ali, told the local News Live television channel that the ferry's captain had refused to listen to passenger's pleas to anchor the vessel at a sandbar when the storm hit. "Then the storm became more intense and the boat split into two parts before sinking," Ali said.

Torrential rains, strong winds and darkness severely affected rescue operations, which had to be suspended on late Monday night before resuming on Tuesday morning. Roads to the disaster site had been blocked by uprooted trees caused by strong winds, denying the rescue teams' access to the site. State police chief J.N. Choudhury told AFP: "The weather is inclement and the river is rough so the rescue efforts are being

hampered."

One of the survivors, Hasnat Ali, told local television news that he and about 150 other passengers had been riding on the roof of the two-deck ferry when the storm hit. Many of those on the roof were thrown off and managed to swim to shore before the ferry was dashed to pieces. Ali managed to cling to a log and was later rescued by local villagers. Fishermen living with their families in tiny hamlets stretching along the Brahmaputra River combed the shores for survivors. If not for the efforts of those villagers and rescue workers, the death toll would have been higher.

"There were no safety precautions, including lifeboats or safety gear on such a big ferry," Hasnat Ali said. "These locally-built boats are often over-packed so a tragedy like this was waiting to happen. Had authorities been strict about safety rules, the disaster would have never happened." He added that local people had no choice but to rely on unsafe transport to travel to work.

Most of the victims were poor farmers and workers and their family members. Survivors reported that many passengers had continued to board the ferry even after the last tickets had been sold.

Unregulated, dangerous, and overcrowded ferry services are the norm in both India and neighbouring Bangladesh. The boats are the most common mode of transport in Assam, which is dotted with riverside settlements and small islands. One local resident, 27-year-old Enamul Haque, told the Press Trust of India: "The accident was waiting to happen. Private ferry operators blatantly flout [regulations] by carrying

people and goods much above the permissible limit, but the authorities turn a blind eye to such happenings.”

Monday’s ferry disaster could prove to be one of the worst such mass drowning in South Asia.

Last March, 138 people died in Bangladesh when an overloaded ferry sank in the Meghna River southeast of the capital, Dhaka. In December last year, 22 people died when a boat capsized in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. In October 2010, at least 79 Muslim pilgrims drowned when an overcrowded boat carrying 150 passengers sank in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal. In June 2010, another 62 people died when a ferry sank on its way to a temple in northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.

The failure of governments throughout South Asia to legislate and enforce proper safety standards for ferry transportation is another expression of the ruling elites’ contempt and disregard for working people and the poor. The numerous ferry disasters are also the product of successive governments’ grossly inadequate funding of basic social infrastructure and the subordination of transportation services to the dictates of the profit system.

National and regional government members have rushed to express sympathy for the victims of the Assam ferry disaster. Assam chief minister Tarun Gogoi, of the Congress party, announced an official inquiry. There is a long history of such inquiries being used as whitewashes, covering up those responsible.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh occupies a seat in the Rajya Sabha (upper house of India’s parliament) from Assam state. He issued a statement expressing “shock and grief” at the loss of life. Singh and Gogoi have ordered 200,000 Indian rupees (\$US3,374) and 150,000 rupees respectively as compensation to the families of each victim.

Empty statements of sympathy and offers of compensation have not diffused widespread anger among local people affected by the ferry sinking. One young person told the local media: “The Congress party comes begging for our votes every time elections are

due, but their leaders and ministers are missing at the time of crisis.”



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