

39 killed in Hong Kong ferry disaster

Will Morrow
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The number of people killed from a crash between two ferries on October 1 has been officially confirmed at 39, including six children, making it the deadliest maritime disaster in Hong Kong in 40 years.

Those killed were on board the Lamma IV, which was carrying three crew members and 121 passengers, all Hong Kong Electric Company employees and their family members. They had been on a cruise organised to view the fireworks display in Victoria Harbour to celebrate the Chinese National Day.

At 8.23 p.m. the boat collided with the Sea Smooth, a privately-operated commuter ferry, near Lamma Island, a few kilometres south-west of Hong Kong. The left hull of the Lamma IV was torn open, reportedly throwing a number of passengers into the sea. The boat sank within minutes. Many of those killed were reportedly trapped inside the vessel's cabin as it quickly filled with water.

The bodies of 28 people were recovered in searches during the night, with two more found aboard the stricken ship after it was lifted from the water by crane. A further five people have since been certified dead in hospital, out of 101 people hospitalised following the crash.

The Sea Smooth, which is larger than the Lamma IV, suffered severe damage to its left bow, but was able to continue to its destination on Lamma Island. The captain of the ferry, identified as Mr. Chung, was hospitalised with a broken arm and rib.

The cause of the crash remains unclear. Weather conditions were not a factor, as the disaster occurred on a calm night with clear visibility.

The Hong Kong government announced a commission of inquiry, but stated that the findings would not be released for six months.

However, the government has already pre-empted the inquiry by declaring that human error was the primary cause of the incident. Seven crew members, including the captains of both vessels, have been arrested. Hong Kong authorities, however, have not issued any evidence of alleged wrongdoing.

Evidence has emerged suggesting that the government is seeking to scapegoat the crew to evade examination of other issues, including inadequate maritime safety regulations.

According to a report this week in the *South China Morning Post*, the crash could have been avoided if the Lamma IV had been equipped with an anti-collision Automatic Identification System (AIS). Only the Sea Smooth had an AIS, which electronically exchanges data on a vessel's location and velocity with on-land bases and other vessels that are equipped with the system.

A marine radio instructor, speaking anonymously, told the *South China Morning Post*: "The problem is the [government's] Marine Department hasn't made this anti-collision system mandatory for all vessels, whereas in the likes of Singapore it is. In this instance, if the Hong Kong Electric boat had been equipped with AIS and their crew had been trained to use it, it is unquestionable that alarms would have rung and the accident would have been avoided. It's exactly this sort of situation that AIS was invented for."

The Hong Kong government requires that ferries used for public transport, such as the Sea Smooth, have the

system fitted, but not leisure boats such as the Lamma IV. The radio instructor told the *Post* that only 10 percent of such vessels in Hong Kong have AIS.

Questions have been raised as to whether the crash was caused, at least in part, by the Sea Smooth ferry cutting corners to cope with the huge passenger load on October 1. Thousands of people travel from China to Hong Kong and smaller surrounding islands, such as Lamma, that are only accessible by the privately-operated ferry system. The National Day is one of the most profitable days of the year for ferry operators, but the windfall depends on making multiple trips as fast as possible.

The Sea Smooth was on its final journey of the day when it crashed, and the vessel's captain had been on duty for more than 10 hours.

A Reuters report stated: "Some Lamma residents noted that the site of the crash suggested the commuter ferry had veered off its normal course, perhaps in an effort to shave time off its usual route and clear the island more quickly. Several regular ferry passengers said they thought it was travelling unusually fast. There is no speed limit in the waters around where the crash occurred."

Hong Kong and Kowloon (Ferry) Holdings Ltd., which owns the Sea Smooth, rejected claims that the captain was overly fatigued and denied that the ship had deviated from its course.

The government has claimed that the crash was an "isolated incident", but in reality there have been other maritime collisions near Victoria Harbour, one of the world's busiest ports, in recent years.

Reuters reported that in 2007 there were 278 accidents in Hong Kong waters, of which 53 percent were collisions. Last year, there were 351 accidents, with nearly 60 percent collisions. Some of these collisions involved fatalities and serious injuries, including an incident in May 2011 when a hydrofoil passenger ferry en route to Macau hit a speedboat, killing the small vessel's operator.

Chung Tung-tong, general secretary of the Merchant Navy Officers Guild of Hong Kong, said the number of high-speed ferries had risen steadily due to increased tourism from cities in China's Guangdong province. "It's terrible," he said. "A lot of ferries, high-speed catamarans, fishing boats and small cargo ships."

Albert Lai, the founding chairman of the policy think-tank, The Professional Commons, told AFP that water traffic had increased in recent years because soaring accommodation prices in Hong Kong had forced people to live in surrounding islands. He added that hundreds of hectares of land had been reclaimed along Victoria Harbour over the past decade, making journeys by small boats more dangerous, as they were pushed into lanes used by high-speed ferries.

The government has stated that there will be no changes to maritime traffic regulations for at least six months, until the commission of inquiry issues its final report, leaving Hong Kong residents at risk of another disaster.



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