

Bangladesh ferry sinks killing at least 54

Wimal Perera
22 May 2014

At least 54 people are dead and more than 100 missing in a passenger ferry disaster in Bangladesh. The latest sinking occurred just two weeks after another ferry capsized, killing eight passengers.

Last Thursday afternoon, the overcrowded double-decker MV Miraj-4 ferry left Shariatpur in the capital Dhaka for Sureshwar. A few hours later, it was caught in a storm and sank. About 40 passengers managed to swim ashore. Local fishermen helped save others.

It took more than three hours for rescue vessels to arrive on the scene.

The rescue operation was halted after the ferry was hauled onto the bank of the river on Saturday. Among the dead were 11 children and 13 women. Many bodies are believed to have been washed away in the river.

Although the ferry was initially thought to have had 200 passengers on board, a log book recovered from the staffroom cabin recorded the number of passengers as 365. A Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority official said the ferry had the capacity to carry 150-200 people. Ferries, however, are often illegally overcrowded.

Mohammad Ali, 35, survived, but lost his wife 26, and son 7. He said he held his wife's hand, who had their son in her lap. "When I came up to the surface of the water, I knew I was not holding my wife or my son," he said.

Another survivor Sabuj, who jumped overboard when the ship began to sink, blamed the captain. He said the captain "ignored the passengers' calls to stay close to the shore as the storm started brewing" and continued to steer the ship into open water. Other survivors complained of "erratic navigation" by an unskilled operator.

Relatives of the victims held demonstrations on Friday on the shore of the Meghna River, denouncing the authorities for the "slow pace of the rescue operations." Further protests took place on Saturday

over the decision to call off the rescue effort.

An editorial in the *Daily Star* on May 18 said "we are left with the impression that coordination between the different agencies involved in the salvage exercise has been sorely lacking."

The official response to the ferry disaster has followed a well-worn routine, aimed at quelling the anger and opposition of those immediately affected and wider public concern.

The district administration of Munshiganj announced a nominal 20,000 takas (\$US258) in compensation for the families of each of the deceased.

The police filed a case against the ferry owner and six employees on charges of overloading the ferry with passengers and goods. The government formed a three-member committee to investigate the accident's causes.

The purpose of such investigations, however, is to find scapegoats and whitewash the role of governments and state authorities in allowing blatantly unsafe practices to continue. An *Independent* editorial noted on May 17: "Although hundreds of probe committees were formed and the incidents were investigated, nobody was reported to date to have been punished."

Opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader Khaleda Zia expressed shock at the loss of life and demanded that the government take steps to "rescue the missing people and ensure due compensations for the victim's family members."

Successive governments—whether led by the currently ruling Awami League or the BNP—have taken no action to end the continuing death toll from ferry disasters on Bangladesh's extensive river network.

The *Independent* editorial stated: "Passenger vessels should keep as many life jackets as the number of passengers and at least one lifebuoy for every four passengers. But this provision has never been implemented." Only three lifebuoys were seen around the sunken ferry.

In the aftermath of such tragedies, the establishment media outlets routinely point to the obvious safety failings, only to drop the issue once public outrage has passed. The latest disaster is no exception—the media coverage ended within days.

Inland water transport in Bangladesh is mainly used by the poor, because it is relatively cheap. Ferry owners maximise their profits by violating safety rules and regulations, often in league with corrupt authorities.

Ferry disasters are common. Media reports estimate that around 2,000 people have died, with another 176 persons missing, over the past decade in ferry accidents. In 2003, an overcrowded ferry capsized in flood-swollen waters, killing up to 400 people. In 2012, a ferry sinking resulted in at least 112 deaths.

Bangladesh has largest inland waterway network in the world, with about 700 rivers and tributaries. Its inland ports handle about 40 percent of the nation's foreign trade. River transport accounts for about 13 percent of all passengers and 25 percent of freight in the country—higher than for the rail network.

The ferry sinkings are just one aspect of the contempt of the political establishment for working people.

In April last year, the Rana Plaza building in Dhaka collapsed, killing more than 1,100 people, mostly garment workers, who had been forced to continue working despite reporting severe structural cracking. In November 2012, 112 garment workers died in the Tazreen Fashions factory fire—the worst in the country's history.



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:



wsws.org/contact