

Mounting anger over Bangladeshi ferry disasters

Wimal Perera
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Recent ferry disasters in Bangladesh have resulted in dozens of deaths and mounting anger among victims' relatives against government authorities over their criminal negligence regarding unsafe conditions in the country's water transport system.

At least 80 passengers are dead and several still missing in the latest incident involving the ferry MV Mostafa, which collided with the cargo vessel Nargis-1 in the Padma River, west of Dhaka, on February 22. Another ferry sank on February 13 killing at least seven passengers.

The *Shanghai Daily* reported on February 24: "Grief over the disaster has now turned into public outcry, as survivors and relatives of the victims point an accusing finger at the government and maritime authorities as responsible for the tragedy..."

"Scores of anxious and angry people, who waited over the last few days on the banks of the Padma River for the bodies of relatives, claimed that the government has been remiss in its duty to protect ferry passengers and have done nothing to prevent recurrence of such tragedies."

In an attempt to divert this anger, Shipping Minister Shajahan Khan accused the ferry captain of being "in a race" with the cargo vessel. Then, he promised 100,000 Taka (\$US1,280) as compensation and additional 5,000 Taka for burial costs for each family of the dead. The Manikganj district administration also announced a nominal compensation of 20,000 Taka for each of the families of the deceased.

As in previous disasters, the Shipping Ministry and the Department of Shipping has established two committees to probe the disaster and called on "them to submit reports in 15 working days." This report, like many previous ones will be a whitewash.

Between 80 and 90 passengers were saved—some by

rescuers and others by swimming 500 metres to shore. While 27 bodies were recovered from inside the ferry when it was pulled ashore, another 43 bodies were retrieved from the river, of whom more than half were women and children. Those who survived were passengers on the upper deck.

Though the ferry was allowed to carry only 140 passengers, it loaded about 200, according to the survivors. The ferry did not have proper safety equipment.

Police have seized the cargo vessel involved in the collision on its way to a river port in Sirajganj and arrested the captain and his three crew members. While the ferry captain is reportedly missing, Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion has arrested the son of the ferry's owner.

An editorial in the *Daily Star* on February 24 commented: "What makes these deaths even more unacceptable is that such launch accidents have now become a norm, rather than an exception, in the country... In order to prevent such future accidents, we must not only take the people responsible for the accidents to task, but also undertake corrective measures at multiple levels, guarantee the most efficient rescue operations and ensure that faulty vessels and reckless sarengs [captains] are not allowed on the waters."

Similar editorials have been written in the past and routinely ignored. The newspaper praised the minister's decision to probe the incident, then declared: "In the past, however, we have noticed that most of the reports weren't made public, and no lasting reforms were made in the sector to address the underlying structural problems."

Citing a report by nine non-government organisations, the *Daily Star* pointed out that "about

500 committees had been formed since independence to probe into launch accidents and only four reports were published.” The *Dhaka Tribune* noted that “even these recommendations [of those reports] have not been implemented.”

The official response to the ferry disaster has followed a well-worn pattern to quell public anger: the media and politicians express outrage, limited compensation is offered, inquiries are announced and scapegoats are found. Once the outrage dies away, the government and the media buries the incident and nothing is done to improve water safety.

Following an inquiry report into the Pinak 6 tragedy last year, the authorities sacked three staff members of the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) and punished four others. But nothing was done about the report’s recommendations in relation to vessels’ structural and technical defects, uncertified changes in vessel design, overloading of passengers and goods, irresponsible piloting, and ignoring meteorological department advisories.

Successive governments—whether under the currently ruling Awami League or the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)—have taken no action to end the high death toll from ferry disasters on Bangladesh’s extensive river network. According to a BIWTA study, 10,436 people have died in over 20,000 ferry accidents since 1972. Four major ferry disasters, including the recent capsizing of the MV Mostafa, have occurred over the past three years, with a total death toll of 396.

According to the NGO report cited by the *Daily Star*, the substandard design of vessels has also made them vulnerable to disasters. If correctly designed to international rules, water cannot enter into the vessels even after tilting 40 degrees. Ferries built in Bangladesh, however, can sink even when the tilt is just 15 to 18 degrees.

More than 80 percent of vessels have no form of proper certification. There are about 35,000 vessels operating on Bangladesh rivers of which only 13,000 are registered. Only five engineers and ship surveyors have the necessary qualifications to certify passenger vessels and they can only examine about 900 vessels a year.

Bangladesh has the largest inland water network in the world, with about 700 rivers and tributaries. Its inland ports handle about 40 percent of the country’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.

Inland water transport in Bangladesh is mainly used by the poor, because it is relatively cheap. Ferry owners maximise their profits by violating safety regulations including through overloading, in league with government authorities, at the expense of passengers’ lives.



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