

Ferry sinking in China leaves hundreds missing

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A ferry carrying 458 people sank Monday night in China's Yangtze River, in what could be one of the country's worst maritime disasters. The vessel capsized during a storm while on a tourist cruise. As of Wednesday morning, only 14 people had been rescued, with hundreds missing or trapped in the overturned ship. Seven bodies have been recovered.

The ferry, known as the Eastern Star, sank in Jianli County, Hubei Province. It departed from Nanjing in the east for the inland city of Chongqing. According to the ferry's captain and chief engineer, both of whom were among those rescued, they were caught in a cyclone and the heavy winds, and large waves caused their ferry to capsize. Both men have been detained for questioning.

The ferry sank within 10 minutes and no distress signal was sent. Seven people managed to swim to shore, where they reported the accident to authorities. It took rescuers two and half hours to reach the overturned vessel. The Eastern Star retained buoyancy and floated another three kilometers down the river. This is considered a positive sign, as it means there may be air pockets inside the ship allowing survivors to breathe.

The ferry, which was supposedly capable of carrying 534 people, is owned by the government-controlled Chongqing Eastern Shipping Corporation, which has not so far released a statement. The company, which focuses primarily on tourism, built the vessel in 1994. According to China's CCTV, the ferry has four levels and was carrying 406 passengers, mostly aged between 50 and 80. The others on board were 47 crew members and five travel agency employees.

The passengers were on a tour of the Yangtze River that was scheduled for 12 days. The river, the world's third longest, is a popular holiday destination. In 2012, 400,000 people passed through the Three Gorges Dam section.

Some 140 divers, 150 boats and 3,000 people, including 2,100 police officers and soldiers, are involved in the

rescue efforts. Rescuers reported hearing people calling for help from inside the capsized vessel after tapping on the hull. Attempts have been made to cut into the ferry with angle grinders. However, poor weather conditions have hampered rescuers.

Premier Li Keqiang arrived at the scene on Tuesday to direct the rescue operation. State media reported that President Xi Jinping had "issued important instructions immediately." All of this has the hallmarks of a damage-control exercise. The central government is keeping tight control on what is reported to the press, with many journalists being prevented from going to the scene.

The government and travel agency that booked many of the passengers have already come under public fire for their inadequate response.

About 50 family members gathered outside the Shanghai Xiehe Travel Agency yesterday before heading to government offices, demanding information about their loved ones. Huang Yan, who feared her husband and father-in-law were traveling on the ferry, said: "We want the government to release the name list to see who was on the boat."

According to the family members, neither the travel agency nor the government informed them of the sinking, instead leaving them to learn about the disaster from news reports. Xiehe Travel's office was closed on Tuesday. The management simply left behind a note on their door saying members of the company were going to the accident site.

Ji Fumin, whose wife, his wife's aunt, and a friend were on the Eastern Star, told the media: "How can they be so irresponsible? There has been no word from them [Xiehe Travel]."

Weather conditions clearly played a role in the ship's sinking. On Monday, the region received 150 mm (six inches) of rain over a 24-hour period and winds reached 130 kph (80 mph). Traveling in these conditions indicates

recklessness on the part of the company.

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While the role of the captain and the crew is not yet known, comparisons are being drawn between this latest tragedy and the sinking of the Sewol ferry in South Korea last year, in which the captain, Lee Jun-seok, also one of the first to be rescued, left behind 304 people to drown.

Lee was sentenced to 36 years in prison in November for fleeing the Sewol without organizing an evacuation. While he bore a great deal of responsibility, he was vilified by the government and media to distract the public from the criminal negligence of the company that overloaded the ferry with cargo, leading to its sinking.

In all likelihood, the Eastern Star's captain and crew could face a similar fate. As has occurred with previous disasters, Beijing will find a scapegoat to deflect attention from the culpability of government and corporations.

Safety is often overlooked in China in pursuit of higher profits. Industrial accidents are all too common as companies cut corners, and corruption is prevalent. Chongqing Eastern Shipping Company is a state-owned enterprise in heavy debt. According to the *New York Times*, the company last year reported assets of \$14.5 million, while having liabilities of \$29.8 million.

Monday night's tragedy is not the first sinking of a ship on the Yangtze River this year. In January, a tugboat capsized in Fubei Channel, in Jiangsu Province, which includes Shanghai. Of the 25 individuals on board, 22 died. Families of those killed also expressed frustration over the government's slow response.

Both these incidents, as well as many of the frequent industrial accidents in China, demonstrate a lack of proper safety measures, reflecting the contempt of companies and government authorities for the lives of working people.



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