

Death toll rises following ferry sinking in China

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Following the sinking of a passenger ferry in the Yangtze River in China on Monday night, details have begun to emerge shedding light on its causes. Very few of the 456 people on board have been rescued, while the death toll climbs. Hundreds are missing, feared dead.

As of Friday afternoon, just 77 bodies had been found, despite the fact that rescue workers could hear people calling for help from inside the ferry, the Eastern (or Oriental) Star, on Tuesday. Authorities brought in two large cranes to right the ship Friday morning. Only 14 people survived the ordeal.

The anger of family members has grown as the central government has continued to tightly control what information is made public. Official reports stated that sudden cyclonic or tornado-like weather caused the sinking. Large amounts of rain in the region combined with winds upward of 130 kph (80 mph) that struck the ferry, causing it to overturn. Unlike their ocean-going counterparts, river ferries like the Eastern Star are unable to withstand heavy winds.

However, the weather conditions did not catch the ferry unawares, nor were they an anomaly. The region typically receives monsoon rains this time of year. Other vessels in the area of the sinking had dropped anchor due to the poor weather, but the Eastern Star did not. It is still unclear why the ferry did not stop and seek shelter.

The number of people aboard Eastern Star was revised down to 456, from earlier reports of 458. Over 400 passengers were tourists, many between the ages of 50 and 80, while the others onboard were crew members or travel agency employees. Questions have been raised over why no distress call was made, why passengers were unable to put on life vests, and why the captain and chief engineer managed to escape the

ship while others could not.

The Eastern Star, which was capable of carrying 534 people, was built in 1994 and underwent refurbishing in 1997. Vessels of this type typically have a lifespan of 30 years. If the reports of the number of passengers are correct, that would rule out overloading as a possible cause of the sinking.

However, distraught family members have been left without much information. The government is continuing to keep journalists away from the accident site and has still not released the names of those found dead. After news of the sinking became public, family members gathered outside government buildings in Shanghai and in Jianli, near the site of the sinking, demanding to be informed of developments.

Many relatives implored the government to allow them to see the bodies of the deceased, currently at a funeral parlor that is heavily guarded. Others denounced the government for hounding the mourners. “We are followed everywhere we go, even if we just want to pop out to buy things from the shop,” the *Guardian* newspaper quoted one person in Jianli as saying.

Beijing is trying to deflect public anger, running damage control to prevent this latest tragedy from becoming a focal point for anti-government sentiments. As the Eastern Star’s safety record became known, the central government ordered the company that operated the ferry, Chongqing Eastern Shipping Corp., to halt operating a second vessel of the same make, so as to perform a thorough safety check.

A pattern of safety violations has emerged in regard to the company and the industry as a whole. A report from the Nanjing Maritime Bureau stated that the Eastern Star was cited for safety violations along with five other vessels in 2013. Chongqing Eastern Shipping

refused to comment on these reports, saying the company needed to “focus on and be very devoted to dealing with this tragedy properly.”

A separate 2013 report from the Nanjing Maritime Bureau documented 79 safety violations involving Yangtze River cruise operators, detaining six ships as a result. The report cited inadequate safety management systems and emergency protocols, as well as poor staff procedures, as just some of the problems.

Tourism is popular on the Yangtze River, particularly with those unable to afford overseas trips. As competition between different companies grows, short cuts are being taken and companies are hiring sailors without sufficient experience, in order to cut wages. The Nanjing bureau noted that many of the crew members in its 2013 safety reports were unaware of how to put on life jackets.

Despite its crocodile tears, the government has no interest in curtailing the corrupt and unsafe practices of the companies involved.

Just a few weeks ago, Chinese officials participated in a meeting organized by the International Maritime Organization in the Philippine capital of Manila that called for enhanced safety measures for ships. The conclusion from the meeting stated there was “an urgent need to enhance the safety of ships carrying passengers on non-international voyages.”

In many countries around the world, safety standards are largely lacking for such vessels. “Most of the domestic ships don’t even have basic regulations,” Dracos Vassalos, a professor of maritime safety at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, UK, said.

Many ferries in the region have sunk due to overloading, either with passengers or cargo. While that may have not been the case with the Eastern Star, the company’s disregard for safety and its decision to ignore weather conditions is in line with the underlying push for profits that comes at the expense of lives.



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