

At least 23 dead, 17 missing in Indonesian ferry disaster

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A fire, which engulfed an Indonesian passenger ferry travelling from North Jakarta on Sunday morning, has killed at least 23 people. Another 17 passengers remain missing, prompting fears that the death toll will continue to rise over the coming days.

At least 32 survivors were taken to hospital to be treated for injuries, including the effects of severe smoke inhalation and burns. Nine remain in hospital.

While information is scanty, there are already indications that the tragic toll from the blaze was likely compounded by an excessive number of passengers, a lack of life jackets and other lax safety practices.

According to officials, the Zahro Express, which was transporting holidaying Indonesian nationals to Tidung Island, a popular tourist destination, left the port of Muara Angke at around 8:50 a.m. on New Year's Day. Within half an hour of its departure, a fire began on the vessel and spread rapidly. The ship was just 1.6 kilometres from shore.

Spokespeople for the ministry of transportation have stated that the fire may have been caused by a short circuit in the craft's engine room. Passengers said that they first saw smoke coming from the engine.

Officials have said that the speed with which the blaze spread may have been due to flames reaching the vessel's fuel container, causing an explosion. It is not clear if the ship was equipped with fire extinguishers or whether they were used.

Survivors have described scenes of chaos and panic as the ship was rapidly engulfed by flames, leaving them with virtually no time to escape.

Evi, a female passenger told the local media outlet Metro TV: "Fifteen minutes after the boat set sail, people at the back of the boat started making noise... Then I saw smoke, there was more and more, the boat was crowded and people were fighting for life jackets."

One passenger, quoted by Reuters, said: "All passengers panicked and ran up to the deck to throw floats into the water. In a split second, the fire becomes bigger coming from where fuel is stored."

Juju Rukminingsih, another survivor, indicated that there were not enough life jackets for all of the passengers. "When we wanted to go, I panicked because I saw my son jump off the boat without a [life jacket] because somebody else had taken it," she said.

Despite the chaos, survivors have reported stories of bravery and heroism, with passengers assisting one another during the disaster. According to *Jakarta Coconuts*, one of the victims, Jackson Wilhelmus, gave his life-jacket to a pregnant colleague, before drowning.

Other passengers reported having to leave the vessel without a life jacket. Many of them, including children, did not know how to swim. Between 194 and 224 survivors were plucked from the sea, the bulk of them by private boats fishing in nearby waters. Rescue operations have continued.

The wreckage of the boat was towed to shore on Sunday. Twenty of the 23 people who perished in the blaze received burns that were so severe that they could not be identified without an analysis of DNA and dental records. Some had been trampled or overwhelmed by smoke.

On Sunday, the Jakarta Disaster Mitigation Agency revealed that while the ship was carrying upwards of 200 passengers, its manifest had registered just 100 people and six crew members. The practice, which is common in Indonesia, allows private ferry operators to take full fares, without having to pay port operators or government taxes. Port officials are often involved in the scam.

It appears that the government is moving to scapegoat the captain and crew of the vessel, in order to prevent a

broader examination of the widespread conditions that gave rise to the tragedy.

On Monday, the captain, Mohammad Nali, along with three other crew members were detained by Jakarta. Port officials are also reportedly being questioned.

On Tuesday, Nali was identified as a suspect over the discrepancy between the manifest and the ship's actual number of passengers. The captain and some crew members have also been accused of being among the first to leave the ship after the fire began. Nali faces possible charges carrying substantial financial penalties and up to 10 years in prison.

In a bid to assuage mounting anger over the accident, Transportation Minister Budi Karya Sumadi announced on Tuesday that the government would provide survivors and families of the deceased with compensation. He gave no further details. Sumadi also declared that state-owned shipping lines would begin passenger services to the Thousand Islands, an island chain to the north of Jakarta that includes Tidung Island.

Ferry accidents, often involving substantial casualties, are a regular occurrence in Indonesia, with private operators slashing costs and neglecting the most basic safety practices, in order to maximise profits. Workers and the poor have no choice but to undertake the perilous journeys on faulty vessels to travel between the archipelago's islands, which number more than 17,000.

Last December, 20 people were killed in a speed boat explosion in Bali, thought to have been caused by a malfunctioning battery near a fuel tank.

In December 2015, at least 80 people died after a ferry sank off the island of Sulawesi when its engine was overwhelmed by large waves in heavy seas.

Other disasters have claimed even more lives. In 2009, over 200 perished after a ferry went down between Sulawesi and East Kalimantan. Relatives held protests denouncing the limited search and rescue operations conducted by the government. In December 2006, 400 died in a sinking off the coast of East Java. Ferry disasters in 2000 and 2003, each claimed up to 500 lives.

There is no indication that these disasters have had any impact on safety practices or government policy. According to the National Transportation Safety

Commission, the total number of maritime accidents increased from 15 in 2015 to 28 in 2016. A report by the Worldwide Ferry Association in 2015 found that since 2000, Indonesia had experienced a higher number of ferry accidents than any country, aside from Bangladesh.

Maritime deaths are one tragic expression of a broader transport infrastructure crisis. Over 30,000 Indonesian nationals are estimated to perish in traffic accidents each year. A McKinsey report in 2011 pointed to the culpability of successive governments, noting: "In Indonesia, infrastructure investments dropped from 5 percent to 6 percent of GDP in the early 1990s to 2 percent to 3 percent of GDP for much of the last ten years."



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