

Over 100 feared dead in Kiribati ferry disaster

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Kiribati President Taneti Maamau admitted on Monday that a passenger ferry that went missing in the central Pacific 11 days earlier was carrying as many as 100 people. Most of those are feared dead.

No correct accounting of the names or number of missing passengers has been provided. Previous reports stated that the privately-operated vessel, the MV Butiraoi, was carrying about 50 passengers when it left Nonouti Island for Kiribati's capital Tarawa on January 18. The 260-kilometre voyage should have taken no more than two days.

Survivors found drifting in a dinghy on Sunday said people on board escaped to two dinghies and a life raft after the Butiraoi, a 17.5-metre wooden catamaran, broke apart and sank. Wellington Rescue Coordination Centre coordinator Paul Craven told Radio New Zealand the vessel was some distance off the island, but still relatively close to it, when it sank. One of the emergency dinghies had subsequently capsized.

Speaking following a cabinet meeting on Monday, Maamau said the Butiraoi was not seaworthy. The vessel had recently undergone maintenance on its propeller after running aground. It had not yet been checked by the marine authorities and did not have permission to sail, but did anyway. The boat was reportedly not carrying any kind of emergency navigation beacon.

Kiribati authorities only notified New Zealand that the ferry was missing last Friday, six days after it was due in Tarawa. Amid questions as to why it took so long, Maamau claimed the government was not aware the ferry was missing until then. However, a Kiribati plane had earlier searched for the ferry but found nothing as it lacked sophisticated radar equipment.

Rikamati Naare, editor of Radio Kiribati, told Radio NZ the sinking was the country's worst disaster and the

public was deeply shocked by the incident and the president's revelations. He said people were angry and, through social media posts, were calling for legal action against all those connected to the company that owns the ship. Other posts indicated that the ferry was overloaded with passengers and copra.

An NGO worker on Tarawa, Tana Aata, said people were growing frustrated with the lack of information. No update was provided on Tuesday, and Maamau is yet to respond to repeated requests for further comment. The Ministry for Transport, whose maritime division is responsible for the ferries, has remained silent. It is not even clear yet who owns the Butiraoi.

An international search began on the weekend with a NZ Air Force Orion locating the dinghy on Sunday. The six adults and an unconscious teenage girl were picked up by a fishing boat, hundreds of kilometres southeast of Nauru, after drifting for four days in the blazing sun without water or an engine.

The Orion has flown over 315,000 square kilometres of ocean without sighting the missing ferry. Wellington rescue co-ordinator Craven said finding more survivors "is a bit of a needle in a haystack." While expressing concern about the heat and lack of water, food and supplies, he said there was still a possibility that the people in the life raft were alive.

Responsibility for such disasters in the Pacific, which are frequent, rests not only with private owners who flout basic safety requirements and government agencies that either operate ferries or oversee their operations. The poor quality of transport services in the region is bound up with a history of imperialist domination, exploitation and economic underdevelopment.

Kiribati, home to about 108,000 people, only became independent from Britain in 1979. It remains a remote,

impoverished nation of 33 atolls spread out over 3.5 million square kilometres. Climate change and rising sea levels mean the country is at risk of disappearing into the sea within two decades because the average land elevation is less than two metres above sea level.

The latest disaster follows the loss in July 2009 of another ferry while en route between Tarawa and the outlying island of Maiana. Some 33 of the 55 passengers and crew perished. The double-hulled wooden catamaran capsized when the captain attempted to turn around to rescue a crew member who had been swept overboard in high seas.

A month later, the Tongan ferry MV Princess Ashika capsized while travelling from the Tongan capital Nuku'alofa. It sank in less than a minute, just moments after issuing a mayday call. Most of the 74 victims were women and children sleeping below the deck when the ferry overturned. It was the third major marine tragedy in Tonga involving significant loss of life.

The Princess Ashika's disaster provoked widespread anger in Tonga. Relatives of the victims camped for weeks outside the offices of the government-owned Shipping Corporation of Polynesia (SCP), which operated the ferry. In 2011, Tonga's Supreme Court jailed SCP's chief executive and the ferry's captain and first mate after finding them guilty of manslaughter. None of the government ministers, who approved the purchase of the unseaworthy vessel and allowed it to sail, was brought to justice.

In February 2012, more than 100 people died after a ferry sank in large swells and strong winds off the northeast coast of Papua New Guinea (PNG). The MV Rabaul Queen was travelling from New Britain Island to Lae, the second largest city in PNG. Many of the passengers trapped in the sinking boat were children and students returning to begin the new school year.

Deliberate overcrowding also contributed to that tragedy. Local residents expressed longstanding concerns over the unsafe operation of the 22-year-old ferry, run by private operator Peter Sharp, brother of the chairman the PNG National Maritime Safety Authority. The vessel was licensed to carry 310 passengers but at least 350 were on board, plus 12 crew.

Geo-strategic considerations lie behind the search and rescue operations being conducted around Kiribati by

Australia and New Zealand, in conjunction with Washington. An Australian maritime jet and a US Coast Guard C-130 Hercules were due to join the search on Tuesday.

The US and its allies regard the strategically-located South Pacific region as their own "back yard." In March 2016, the Australian and New Zealand governments utilised the devastation of Fiji caused by Cyclone Winston to send ships, aircraft and hundreds of military personnel to that former British colony. The military intervention dovetailed with their role in Washington's "pivot to Asia" to assert its domination over the Indo-Pacific region, especially against China.



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