

Over 193 feared dead in another Indonesian ferry disaster

John Harris
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A passenger ferry capsized on Lake Tabo, in northern Sumatra, Indonesia on Monday evening. Only 18 people have been rescued and three have been declared dead. An estimated 193 people are missing and presumed dead, raising fears that it could be Indonesia's worst ferry disasters since 2009.

The wooden ferry was reportedly carrying over five times its legal capacity of 43 passengers and there were only 45 life jackets on-board. The port ignored two severe weather alerts from the Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency (BMKG) before the boat departed.

Lake Toba is a popular destination during the Islamic festival of Eid that marks the end of the month of fasting, Ramadan and fell this year on the June 15. The ferry was heading to the port of Tigaras from Samosir Island and sunk about half-way through the 40-minute trip.

A survivor, Juwita Sumbayak, told the *Strait Times* that the ferry had been hit by high waves. The boat tipped taking on water, sparking panic among passengers. The vessel was then smacked hard by another wave and suddenly capsized. "Many passengers without a life jacket jumped into the deep lake," she said. "I jumped, I cried with fear."

Rudi Wibowo, another survivor, said that he was treading water for an hour before he was rescued and saw all nine of his friends drown. "The majority of those who survived were outside on the front deck, as they had arrived late and the seating areas were full ... The passengers inside were unable to break the windows and escape," he said.

Riko Saputra was rescued after an hour in the water using his bike helmet as a buoy. He reported that on top of overcrowding, the boat's instability had been compounded by dozens of motorcycles packed on one

side of the boat.

A video released by the National Disaster Mitigation Agency showed the desperate efforts of crewmen from a passing vessel who threw life jackets and lifebuoys to rescue those in the water but their efforts were hindered by rough waters.

Authorities have reported that the ferry was operating illegally as it did not have a manifest or tickets for passengers. As a result, it has been difficult to finalize accurate numbers of the missing. Rescue teams compiled information from survivors and relatives. Private ferry operators often disclose false numbers of passengers to dodge operation costs and government taxes.

The search effort has been inadequate. After five days, the ferry has yet to be located and regional and state governments have failed to provide sufficient resources.

At a depth of 505 metres, Lake Toba is one of the deepest lakes in the world. The National Search and Rescue Agency chief Muhammad Syaugi reported that "more sophisticated underwater search methods require larger ships that aren't available on the lake."

On Friday, Indonesia's navy provided search teams with sonar equipment that can locate objects at 600 metres.

The tragedy has devastated hundreds of families, friends and relatives.

Suwarni denounced the inadequate government response, saying: "What kind of government is this that can't protect their own people from unnecessary accidents? And after the accident they're not able to find the victims. I beg help from everyone to quickly find my son and his girlfriend."

In an effort at damage control, Indonesian President Joko Widodo on Wednesday called for an overhaul and

re-evaluation of water transportation safety standards, “I am asking for this kind of accident to not happen again.”

As in previous maritime disasters, the Indonesian government has sought to scapegoat the crewmembers of the ship to divert attention away from the broader issues that lead to such catastrophes. Captain Tua Sagala, who was among the 18 rescued and reportedly owned the vessel, was detained by authorities for questioning.

Budi Rahario, CEO of the insurance company Jasa Raharja, issued a statement on Tuesday indicating that injured survivors would receive 20 million rupiah (about \$US1,400) and the families of dead victims would receive compensation of 50 million rupiah (\$US3,500). No further details have been provided.

Transportation Minister Budi Karya Sumadi pledged that the ministry would spend 75 billion rupiah to improve the five docks in Lake Toba. He added that all commercial boat operators on Lake Toba will undergo an audit by the government and will be suspended from sailing until safety standards are met.

None of these measures, even if they are carried out, will put an end to such disasters. Rather they are aimed at deflecting public anger over the unscrupulous profiteering by private ferry operators and the failure of authorities to enforce minimal safety standards. In a country that is an archipelago, it is workers and the poor who are compelled to use ferries for transport.

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Indonesia has an appalling track-record for maritime disasters. The Indonesian Search and Rescue Agency reported that there were 715 maritime accidents in 2016 that resulted in fatalities and/or injuries.

This disaster comes less than a week after an overloaded longboat with 43 passengers capsized off of the coast of Makassar in the Sulawesi, killing 13 people. This followed another tragedy earlier last week when four people died after a speedboat carrying 30 people sank off southern Sumatra.

Lake Toba itself was the scene of a previous ferry disaster in 1997 when an estimated 80 people lost their lives.

A distraught grandfather, Muhaimin who lost eight of his relatives in the latest tragedy, told the media: “My sons, my daughter-in-laws and my grandchildren have

been the victims of greedy businessmen who just want to take advantage of the holiday season without thinking of people’s safety. It would not happen if they follow the rules. But they made money over our misery.”

The latest disaster is another manifestation of the far broader social crisis created by capitalism. It is the outcome of irresponsible government policy and enforcement, inadequate and disintegrating infrastructure and the subordination of basic social needs to profit.

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