

Another Indonesian ferry disaster, 34 confirmed dead

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A passenger ferry ran aground in shallow water last Tuesday afternoon in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. Of the 189 passengers on board, 34 have been declared dead and 155 have been rescued or swam to safety. This is the third major ferry disaster in Indonesia in the past month.

The ferry was en route from Port Bira to Pamatata on Selayar Island when it encountered strong winds and rough seas two hours into its journey. High waves caused a hull breach on the ship's portside, flooding the vessel and damaging the engine. The deck was deluged with water that swept away vehicles and passengers.

The captain in a desperate effort to prevent the ferry from sinking and save as many passengers as possible, deliberately steered the vessel into the shallows off Selayar Island. The boat ran aground approximately 300 metres from the shore.

Photos and videos on social media showed terrified passengers clinging to the ship and using ropes to descend into the rough waters. Others were wading and assisting people to get onto the rescue boat.

Local residents braved rough waters to assist trapped passengers, using fishing vessels to transport people to safety on Wednesday. Indonesia's Transportation Ministry said that a fleet of smaller ships had to be used in the rescue operations as larger craft were prevented from approaching the ferry because of the shallow water and bad weather.

Agus H. Purnomo, the director-general of sea transportation reported that "the captain and the owner of the ship were the last two people to come down from the passenger ship."

Among the casualties were infants as young as two and three. Some of the injured are being treated at the island's local hospital.

Last Thursday, Sutopo Purwo Nugroho, a spokesman from the Indonesia Disaster Management Agency, declared that the ship had exceeded its maximum passenger capacity by 60. There were 189 passengers on board the ferry at the time of the tragedy, but the ship's manifest listed only 139 people and 48 vehicles.

Private ferry operators in Indonesia often cram their vessels to overcapacity and underreport passengers to boost profits by circumventing heavy government taxes and lowering operation costs.

Transportation Minister Budi Karya Sumadi sought to deflect responsibility away from the government to the ship's captain and crew. He declared on Tuesday that "if the boat was found to be not seaworthy we will take firm action against the operator."

Maritime disasters are frequent in the Indonesian archipelago, with shipping companies often evading safety regulations. The victims are working people and the rural poor who have no other option but to risk their lives on poorly maintained vessels to travel among the archipelago's 17,000 islands.

Sulawesi was the region where a ferry disaster killed an estimated 300 people in 2009. The blame for such tragedies does not rest solely with ferry operators and captains but with the lack of regulation and its enforcement by the government and state bureaucracy.

Conscious of widespread public distrust, President Joko Widodo stated last week that the disaster was caused by "undisciplined services by people that should be responsible for safety on [the] sea." Widodo went on to try to divert attention from his administration's responsibility by naming the region's head of transportation as a suspect responsible for the tragedy.

The mounting toll from ferry disasters is clearly putting pressure on the government. Three weeks ago, 13 died after a boat carrying about 43 people sank off

Makassar, South Sulawesi's capital.

The latest tragedy occurred on the same day that authorities abandoned the retrieval of a ferry that sank two weeks ago at Lake Toba, Sumatra, citing the technical and logistical difficulties of the operation. According to Nugroho Budi Wiryanto, a spokesman from the National Search and Rescue Agency, the ship was located at a depth of 420 metres and bodies were located further down at 455 metres.

Rescue Agency spokesman Muhammad Yusuf Latif said that they had discussed getting a vessel from Singapore to retrieve the boat and the victims but decided to cancel it, citing the "high cost" and the three weeks it would take to get the ship to the lake.

Official estimates have been revised down from 193 to 164 people missing and presumed dead, and 21 survivors. Three have been confirmed dead. The ferry had been operating illegally and did not have a manifest or tickets to count passengers. The estimate relies on reports from relatives and survivors of the tragedy. The boat was carrying nearly five times its capacity of 43 and dozens of motorcycles.

In an effort to curb the anger of relatives protesting the inadequate government response, a government-funded monument will be erected in memory of the victims.

The ship's captain and three port and transportation officials have also been arrested on the charges of sailing without a permit and negligence. The suspects could face up to 10 years' imprisonment and a 1.5 billion rupiah (\$US145,000) fine.

Targetting the captain and officials serves to obfuscate the broader underlying political and economic reasons that allow such tragedies to occur on a regular basis. After these disasters, governments have routinely promised improvements in the maritime sector, but nothing has materialised.

A 2016 report from the Asian Development Bank highlighted the collapse in transport infrastructure. "The situation has deteriorated since the 1997 Asian financial crisis, with current investment in infrastructure at about 3.5 percent of GDP versus a 1997 pre-crisis level of approximately 8 percent," it stated. The report noted that in 2015 only \$5.2 billion had been allocated to the Ministry of Transportation.

Underscoring the woefully inadequate resources devoted to maritime infrastructure, a 2015 report by

DBS Group Research estimated that 900 trillion rupiah (about \$US62.4 billion) would be required to modernise maritime facilities and transportation in Indonesia.



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