Inquiry whitewashes Kiribati government over ferry disaster

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21 October 2019

A report compiled by a Commission of Inquiry investigating the 2018 ferry disaster in the Pacific state of Kiribati, in which 95 people perished, was finally released on October 2 after months of public pressure and growing anger. Only single copies were initially available at the office of the president, Taneti Maamau, and the national library. The restriction was criticised as secretive and undemocratic, with claims that time restrictions had been imposed along with a ban on copying, photographing and note-taking.

The document only became generally available, including to overseas media, on October 8. The report was originally submitted in September 2018, but the government declared that it would not be made public until a police investigation was completed.

The sinking of the MV Butiraoi, a double-hulled wooden catamaran, in January 2018 was the country's worst disaster. The population was deeply shocked, with widespread criticism of authorities over the extraordinary tardiness of the rescue effort and demands for legal action against the operating company. The vessel, built for the government in 2010, was owned by the Abemama Island Council but leased to a company called TOKs Holding Co Ltd, which was responsible for maintenance and repair work.

The report whitewashes the Kiribati government and its agencies, which are absolved of any wrongdoing. It identifies no criminal culpability and makes no demands for prosecutions, sackings or resignations, including within the company.

The report makes clear the Butiraoi should never have been allowed to set sail. It was severely overloaded, unauthorised to carry passengers, had no emergency beacon, insufficient life jackets and its radio licence had expired—all of which made it unseaworthy. The boat had run aground three times previously, compromising its structural integrity, but had not been checked by marine authorities. It had no permission to sail, but did so anyway.

The Butiraoi departed the island of Nonouti on January 18 for the capital Tarawa, with over 100 passengers and crew, including 23 school students, and 29.5 tonnes of cargo. The 260 kilometre journey should have taken two days. It was not until seven days later that the company raised the alert, asking Nonouti's mayor to mount a search and rescue operation.

President Maamau has consistently claimed the government was not aware the ferry was missing, even though a plane had reportedly searched for the ferry and found nothing as it lacked sophisticated radar equipment. After a series of meetings, a search-and-rescue operation was mounted by the Marine Division on 26 January, eight days after the sinking. An alarm was sent to the rescue coordination centre in New Zealand and a NZ Air Force Orion and two Australian aircraft were deployed, arriving on 27 January.

For the first time, the report reveals, in terrible detail, the circumstances surrounding the sinking and the fate of its victims. Most died from hunger, dehydration and hypothermia. One woman died while giving birth as the ferry sank.

The captain, who is not named in the report and who went down with the vessel, was warned on the day of departure of severe weather with swells up to three metres. However, the captain decided to set sail anyway without telling the marine guard at Nonouti.

After only 30 minutes at sea, the main cross beam holding the catamaran's two hulls together failed. After three hours, the ferry collapsed in on itself, with the cabin and wheelhouse tumbling between the hulls. From there, panic ensued as the vessel sank rapidly.

The Butiraoi had only enough life jackets for 30

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people. It was equipped with just two inflatable life rafts, which subsequently failed, and two aluminium dinghies. With passengers fighting and scrambling for their lives, no distress message was sent and an emergency locator beacon was either not activated or did not work.

About 30 survivors clinging to the dinghies drifted away into the open seas. They had little food and no water, and one by one started to perish. Seven people were finally spotted by the searching NZ Orion, frantically waving from one dinghy. The two crew and five passengers were the only survivors.

The commission blamed the ship's operator and captain, saying the Butiraoi was not regularly maintained. In 2017, the report said, a locator beacon was borrowed from a pilot boat so as to pass an inspection. The captain and crew were under-qualified and should not have been in charge after the previous groundings. The captain was criticized for his lack of leadership, and emphasis was placed on the use of alcohol during working hours by crew members.

While making only general criticisms of the company's lack of "procedures," the report in fact blames the passengers for overloading the ferry. The operator had a debt to a local businessman and promised free passage to Nonouti people to pay it off. The report alleges the passengers "took advantage" to board in large numbers, and were "audacious… to the point of being virtually unstoppable by both master and crew."

The government escaped any significant criticism. The report makes 15 hollow recommendations about tightening regulations, including ship-building guidelines and oversight, a reporting mechanism for damage, and code of ethics among seafarers. This is likely to remain a dead letter. The government failed to implement stricter maritime laws following a previous ferry sinking in 2009, which left 33 people dead.

Two groups—Tragedy that Affects Lives, composed of victims' families, and Kiribati Citizens Against Corruption—are preparing lawsuits against the government. Ngatau Neneia, a NGO worker representing the latter group, said the case would centre on gross negligence: fewer people would have died if authorities had launched a search and rescue mission earlier. Australian and New Zealand legal firms have been approached, Neneia said, because local lawyers are seen as being "too close to the government."

Such disasters in the Pacific are frequent, with similar sinkings in Tonga and Papua New Guinea in recent years. Responsibility rests not only with the private owners and government agencies that run the ferries or oversee their operations. The poor quality of transport services 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. The remote and impoverished nation has 33 atolls spread over 3.5 million square kilometres. From 1900 to 1980, Britain, New Zealand and Australia reaped huge profits from intensive phosphate mining on the country's Banaba Island, which made it practically unlivable. Today, climate change and rising sea levels mean the country risks disappearing into the sea.

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