

At least 22 people killed in boat accident in southern Indian state of Kerala

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At least 22 people, including 15 children, were killed when a double-decker tourist boat overturned and sank near a beach in the Malappuram district of the southern Indian state of Kerala last Sunday evening. Ten people, some of them in critical condition, were admitted to hospital.

Police said that overcrowding as well as the operation of the boat without proper safety measures led to the tragedy. The boat was carrying about 40 people, or double its capacity. Ibrahim and Izahak, brothers from Kondotty who had canceled their trip at the last minute, told the local news website Onmanorama that they did not take part in the ride after seeing the crush of passengers. “It was filled with the maximum number of people as it was the last trip for the day,” they said. “Usually, tourists are not allowed to take a boat ride after 6.30 p.m. But on Sunday, the ride was after sunset.” They also noticed that no life jackets were provided to the passengers.

Quoting from the Mathrubhumi news channel, BBC reported Shameer, a lifeguard involved in rescue operations, as saying that “the boat was completely upside down” when rescuers arrived at the scene. “I recovered four bodies and none of them had life jackets on,” he added.

Police took P. Nassar, the boat owner, who sought to abscond after the accident, into custody and an FIR (First Information Report) was registered under CrPC Section 174 (unnatural deaths) against him.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi quickly took to twitter to say he was “pained by the loss of lives” and announced an ex-gratia payment of 200,000 rupees (\$US2,446) from the PMNRF (Prime Minister’s National Relief Fund) to the next of kin of each deceased.

Playing chorus with Modi, Kerala Chief Minister

Pinarayi Vijayan of the Stalinist Communist Party (Marxist), or CPM, announced that Monday would be “a day of mourning” with all government events postponed as a mark of respect to the victims.

Neither Modi nor Vijayan has any genuine sympathy for the loss of life from a disaster that was waiting to happen. With the typical announcement of meager compensation, crocodile tears on Twitter, and legal action against greedy boat operators, they both try to cover up their culpability for the deaths of innocent people. Vijayan’s state government, like that of Modi at the Centre, defends the profit interests of the capitalist elite while allowing them to freely break safety and environmental regulations. This includes transport, as was shown in the case of Sunday’s boat accident.

Kerala is a popular holiday destination for Indian and foreign tourists alike. In 2023, Kerala adopted the tag line “Kerala-God’s Own Country.” In tourism promotion, it was listed in thirteenth spot in the *New York Times*’ annual list of places to visit. One of the state’s top attractions are its traditional wooden houseboats, which sail in the brackish lagoons and canals that crisscross much of the tropical coastline. However, rampant corruption and gross violation of safety regulations are widespread in this industry. To give an idea, according to a report in the *Hindu* on June 13, 2022, when the Port Authority conducted a crackdown on illegal houseboats in Alappuzha in Kerala, it found nearly half of the estimated 1,500 vessels in the backwaters in Alappuzha operating without registration. The area is one of the most popular tourist attractions in India.

After the tragedy, Onmanorama carried a feature report recalling a number of similar boat accidents in Kerala in recent years. In 2009 in Thekkady Lake near

the Mullaperiyar Dam 46 people drowned when a brand new KTDC double-decker boat overturned. The boat had been carrying 95 passengers when its maximum passenger capacity was 75. The boat did not have a license; in 2007 at Thattekad near Kochi, 18 people, including 15 school children drowned when they were returning from a trip to Thattekad Bird Sanctuary. Thirty five passengers were on board in the private picnic boat made to hold just six. In 2002, in the Kumarakom boat tragedy, 29 people drowned, including a nine-month-old baby. The report showed over 250 passengers had boarded the boat, which was owned by the Kerala State Water Transport Department, although it had the capacity to hold only 101 passengers.

The article found that all tragedies had the following similarities: overcrowding, faulty boat design, absence of life jackets and life buoys, disrepair and official indifference.

According to Onmanorama, the boat named “Atlantic” that capsized at Malappuram last Sunday was “said to have been a fishing vessel retrofitted haphazardly to look like a double-decked picnic vessel.”

A number of people had already warned of the imminent threat posed by the Atlantic’s flawed design, but authorities had not taken these warnings seriously. Speaking to Onmanorama, Nisar, who runs two eight-seated tourist boats, said: “The design (of Atlantic) was flawed. And on top of it, Nasar’s (Nassar Patarakath, the owner of Atlantic) men were taking double the capacity of tourists.”

The local councilor K.P. Nisamudeen, an experienced fisherman who worked on larger boats in Abu Dhabi, saw that the Atlantic was taking people in trips “even after the 6 p.m. deadline.” Even though he had written about this dangerous practice to the District Tourism Promotion Council and also to the police, “There was no response.” He also revealed that the boat was not registered with the Port Department.

Even though the police on April 22 ordered all four boats owned by Nassar Patarakath to halt service till their papers were cleared, the Atlantic resumed service the following day, he said. “If the police were strict and did not allow the boat to resume service, 22 lives could have been saved,” observed Councilor Nisamudeen, adding “We should know on whose

direction the police allowed the boat to resume service.”

The Onmanorama article further exposed shocking lapses in the processes of boat registering and launching. The boat “did not have design approval nor was it modified in an NIV (Kerala Inland Vessels)-approved yard. It had not cleared a stability test done to check if the boat would be steady even if all the passengers moved to one side of the vessel,” the website reported. All other details clearly show that the tragedy was all but inevitable and the state authorities did nothing to prevent it.

These shocking details are only the tip of the iceberg of the corrupt economic practices in the Stalinist-governed state, which place profits over human lives. Initiating a Public Interest Litigation to probe the tragedy, the Kerala High Court said the accident was a result of “the deadly cocktail of callousness, greed and official apathy.”

The boat tragedy underscores that the policies for Kerala’s “development” pursued by the Stalinist Communist Party of India (Marxist), which are predicated on making the state a haven for Indian and foreign capital, are in no way a progressive alternative to the policies of the far-right Modi government or other strategies of capitalist “development.”

While the CPM’s model is characterized by high literacy and life expectancy rates when compared to the rest of the country, Kerala has been one of the worst affected states by the COVID-19 pandemic, recording a total of 71,883 deaths. The Vijayan government has abandoned all COVID prevention measures, including mask mandates. It is thus implementing the same policy of placing profits over human lives as its counterparts in other Indian states and the Modi government at the center.



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