

Ferry sinks in Philippines killing 42, dozens more missing

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In the pre-dawn hours of January 26 in the Philippines, the roll-on/roll-off passenger ferry MV Trisha Kerstin 3 sank in the Sulu Sea off Baluk?Baluk Island while on its regular run from Zamboanga City on Mindanao Island to Jolo City on Sulu Island. Dozens have been killed while the exact cause of the disaster is still under investigation.

As of February 3, the Philippine Coast Guard has confirmed 42 dead, including two children and a crew member. About 40 are still listed as missing, while 316 people were rescued. Ten crew members, including the captain, have also been reported missing.

As is often the case in the Philippines, overloading of passengers leads to inconsistent passenger data, making exact casualty figures unclear. This is the second serious deadly accident connected to the ferry's owner, Aleson Shipping Lines, in the last three years.

Many of the survivors floated in the water for several hours as they waited for rescue. "We're near Basilan, but it took them more than three hours to respond to us," said survivor Aquino Sajili, who called the response from the Philippine coast guard "unacceptable." Instead, local fishing vessels were the first to arrive on the scene to rescue those in the water.

Sajili also pointed out that it was fellow passengers who organized the evacuation of the ship and distribution of lifejackets. "No one from the crew alerted us," he stated. Despite claims by the Maritime Industrial Authority, which operates under the Department of Transportation (DOTr), survivors also reported that there were not enough life vests available or that they were locked up and inaccessible. Other passengers also reported the absence of a warning system on the vessel to alert them of the danger as the ferry sank.

Various accounts point to different causes for the

ferry capsizing. Zamboanga City Mayor Khymer Adan Olaso, a former ship captain and married to one of the ferry company's owners suggested, "Perhaps the lashing materials couldn't handle the strain. Maybe a truck was heavy, perhaps it was overcapacity, so they didn't notice it. The rolling materials snapped and the ship rolled to one side—when it rolled, the truck went with it and tilted. As the truck tilted, the ship hit an 'angle of loll,' and then the ship proceeded to sink."

The Philippines coast guard has suggested a squall, or sudden intense wind led to the capsizing though Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration weather forecaster Benison Estareja noted that it is rare for such an event to cause ships to sink in the country. Another survivor, Jun Guro, also contradicted the claim of a squall, stating, "I hope there will be an investigation, because the weather was fine. We sank even though there was no typhoon."

The DOTr on January 27 ordered a ten-day safety audit of Aleson Shipping Lines and its vessels, which have been grounded. However, poor vessel maintenance, overloading, and a lack of safety enforcement is commonplace throughout the Philippines, where many working class people rely on ferries for travel due to its relatively inexpensive costs.

In the meantime, the ruling class has provided paltry assistance to the survivors and the families of the dead. The Department of Social Welfare and Development, for example, pledged just ₱10,000 (\$US169) each to the families of only two confirmed fatalities to assist with burials and ₱5,000 (\$US85) each to 134 survivors for medical expenses.

Ferry transport is essential to millions in an island nation like the Philippines. It should be a public utility run safely for the benefit of the working people, yet private operators cut maintenance costs, skimp on crew

training, and overload vessels while state agencies simply look the other way. Whatever the results of the DOTr's "safety audit," it will ultimately lead to nothing more than issues being covered up and ignored. The result is an ongoing pattern of "social murder," where working people and the poor pay with their lives for corporate gain.

This is evident from the fact that inquiries have followed every major incident in recent decades and yet have not prevented tragedies from repeatedly occurring. Temporary probes and token punishments are meant to obscure the fact that under capitalism safety is subordinated to the drive for profit. According to the DOTr, Aleson has been involved in 32 safety-related incidents since 2019. Despite this record, the company was allowed to continue operating.

The record of Aleson Shipping Lines includes the MV Lady Mary Joy 3 fire in March 2023 that killed 33 people. The ferry was operating the same route as the one involved in the most recent disaster.

Such catastrophes across the Philippine archipelago are far from a rare or unknown occurrence. In 1987, in the deadliest peacetime maritime disaster in history, the ferry, MV Doña Paz sank after it collided with the oil tanker MT Vector in the Tablas Strait while en route from Tacloban to Manila, the capital. An estimated 4,386 people died. The ferry was discovered carrying more than double its capacity, had no radio, and life jackets were reportedly locked away. The MT Vector itself was found to be unseaworthy and operating without a license.

In 1980, MV Don Juan collided with an oil tanker off Mindoro Island, resulting in hundreds of deaths. As a result of overloading and missing passengers, the true figures for this and many other tragedies are unknown. Eight years later, MV Doña Marilyn capsized while sailing from Manila to Tacloban City during Typhoon Ruby in which 389 people died. In 1994, the MV Cebu City collided with a Singaporean freighter in Manila Bay, killing around 140. In 2008, the MV Princess of the Stars capsized near Sibuyan Island during Typhoon Fengshen leading to 814 deaths.

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