3 ferry disasters claim about 250 lives across the Asia-Pacific

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"The Patna was a local steamer as old as the hills, lean like a greyhound, and eaten up with rust worse than a condemned water-tank.

"Eight hundred people and seven boats—and no time! Just think of it."

A fictionalized account of the 1880 Jeddah passenger-ship disaster; Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (1900)

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Fire engulfed a Philippine ferry and two other passenger vessels capsized in Vanuatu and Indonesia over four days last week. At least 85 people are confirmed dead and more than 170 remain missing, almost certainly bringing the combined death toll to more than 250.

The *MV June Aster* caught fire on September 9 while approaching Coron in the western Philippine province of Palawan. According to the latest Philippine Coast Guard accounting, 77 people died, 43 survived and eight remain missing.

Survivors reported explosions from the cargo hold before flames and thick smoke swept through the vessel. Most of the bodies were found in the economy accommodation and cabin areas. The cause of the fire has not been determined.

Two days later, the *MV Matui* capsized in heavy seas while traveling from Espiritu Santo to Ambae in Vanuatu. Authorities believe 53 people were aboard; 14 survived, two bodies have been recovered and 37 people are missing and presumed drowned. The absence of a reliable manifest, however, has produced conflicting totals.

Marine warnings had been issued before the *Matui* sailed. Vanuatu's maritime commissioner said the vessel was authorized to carry cargo, not passengers, and had been warned the day before the disaster against carrying excess personnel. The company that operated the vessel, Tui Shipping Agency, had been removed from the national business register in June.

The disaster was compounded by an appalling delay in the rescue effort. An organized search reportedly did not begin until more than 30 hours after the vessel capsized. Survivors spent more than a day in the water, while private boats and a local aircraft carried out much of the initial rescue.

On September 13, the *Virgo Transport 8* capsized in the Java Sea while traveling from Surabaya to Banjarmasin, Indonesia. The ferry was carrying 243 people and 89 vehicles. The sinking likely claimed 135 lives. Six bodies have been recovered, while 129 people remain missing from the sunken vessel.

A crew member said the ship overturned in less than five minutes after being struck by heavy waves. Five survivors spent nine hours clinging to a small liquefied petroleum gas cylinder because they could not locate a lifeboat or inflatable raft. High waves and strong winds prevented rescuers from boarding the wreck or conducting underwater searches.

These disasters were not freak occurrences. They form part of a continuous and entirely preventable record of death throughout Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

Indonesia and the Philippines are vast archipelagic countries comprising approximately 17,000 and 7,641 islands respectively. Vanuatu consists of more than 80 islands. Ferries are an essential social service, transporting workers, students, families, vehicles, food and other goods between communities separated by water.

Between 2000 and 2014, approximately 70 percent of recorded ferry accidents and fatalities worldwide occurred in Asia. More than half of the accidents involved Bangladesh, China, Indonesia and the Philippines. Indonesia alone accounted for 27 of the 160 fatal ferry accidents recorded globally during this period.

Less than eight months before the *June Aster* fire, the *MV Trisha Kerstin 3* capsized off Basilan in the southern Philippines. The final Coast Guard accounting recorded 65 deaths and 14 missing. Survivors reported that life jackets were inaccessible, the crew failed to organize the evacuation and local fishing boats arrived before the Coast Guard.

A conservative count of major passenger-vessel disasters across Southeast Asia and the Pacific since the 2013 sinking of the *St. Thomas Aquinas* produces a combined toll exceeding the roughly 1,500 people who died aboard the *Titanic*. The real total is undoubtedly higher, as overcrowding is common, manifests are routinely incomplete and many smaller accidents are scarcely reported.

Every major disaster is followed by the announcement of an investigation, safety audit or criminal inquiry. Yet prosecutions are fragmented and rare, and senior corporate figures generally escape accountability.

After the *Princess of the Stars* sank in the Philippines in 2008, killing more than 800 people, criminal proceedings against a Sulpicio Lines executive dragged through the courts for 13 years before being dismissed in 2021. A civil court found the company negligent and awarded damages, but no senior company official was criminally convicted.

When criminal charges are brought, responsibility is generally confined to captains, crew members and lower-level regulators, while the owners and executives of larger shipping companies escape punishment. Indonesia sentenced the captain-owner of the grossly overloaded *Sinar Bangun* to five years' imprisonment after it sank in 2018. But in Papua New Guinea, the owner and captain of the *Rabaul Queen* were acquitted of manslaughter over the 2012 disaster that killed at least 140 people, and prosecutors subsequently abandoned the remaining charges against them.

Responsibility is repeatedly fragmented and displaced. Prosecutors focus on the person at the helm, an individual crew member or an isolated regulatory failure, while the profit-making decisions that produce ageing fleets, inadequate maintenance and unsafe operations are covered up.

The three vessels lost last week were operated by private enterprises of different sizes. PT Virgo Karya Shipping was reportedly a one-ferry Indonesian company. Tui Shipping Agency was a small Vanuatu operator that no longer possessed active registration. Atienza Interisland Ferries is a private Philippine regional carrier whose finances and ownership structures are largely opaque.

That some of these companies are little more than ramshackle one-vessel operations only underscores the irrationality of the system. An essential transport network, on which entire island communities depend for food, work and travel, has been entrusted to private businesses looking to scrape profit out of the needs of the working people who must rely on them.

The ferry fleets of Southeast Asia are stocked with the castoffs of wealthier countries. A Japanese development study found that every roll-on/roll-off passenger vessel serving major Philippine routes was second-hand, more than 95 percent imported from Japan, with an average age of 31 years.

The *Virgo Transport 8* embodied this global hierarchy. Built in Japan in 1987, it carried passengers there as the *Ferry Kurushima* until June 2025. Sold to an Indonesian operator, it entered service between Surabaya and Banjarmasin in July 2026 and capsized two months later at the age of 39.

Age alone does not render a ship unseaworthy. But the trade reveals a global hierarchy in the value placed on human life: vessels retired in wealthy countries are sold on and worked for decades longer, carrying workers and the poor under safety conditions that would be unacceptable in the countries from which the ships came.

The risks of inter-island travel are divided along class lines. The wealthy fly; workers, drivers, small traders, students and poorer families endure long ferry crossings because fares are cheaper and because their livelihoods often require them to travel with vehicles and cargo.

The class character of the disasters is unmistakable. Of the 243 people aboard the *Virgo Transport 8*, 183 were crew members, ship-related workers, drivers or drivers' assistants. On the *June Aster*, rescuers found the charred remains concentrated in the economy accommodation area.

The class divide is brutally marked at Coron, one of the Philippines' leading luxury-resort destinations. Affluent visitors fly into Busuanga and continue by private boat to island hotels charging hundreds or even thousands of dollars a night. Workers and ordinary families make the journey from Manila overnight in economy accommodation, aboard ferries carrying the trucks, motorcycles and food supplies on which the resort economy depends.

These deaths are not an unavoidable consequence of geography or foul weather. They are social murder—the foreseeable killing of working people through dangerous conditions that governments and operators know about but leave unchanged. Every investigation repeats the same findings: ageing ships, false manifests, inaccessible life jackets, inadequate training, delayed rescues and ignored weather warnings.

Inter-island transport must be removed from the profit calculations of private corporations and individual operators. It should be operated as a publicly owned and properly funded utility, with modern vessels, trained crews, enforceable safety standards and rescue services adequate to the lives of the millions of working people who depend upon it.