

Bangladesh's worst ferry disaster claims nearly 200 lives

By Nishanthi Priyangika
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More than 165 people are dead in Bangladesh's worst ferry disaster and the figure could rise further as over 100 are still missing. Unofficial reports put the death toll at 188. At least 40 of the dead are children.

The overcrowded ferry *Rajhongashi* carrying nearly 400 passengers sank in the Meghna River in the early morning of December 29 after colliding in heavy fog with another ferry. While the other vessel remained intact, the *Rajhongashi* sank within minutes in about 10 metres of water at Ekhlaspur, 100km southeast of the capital of Dhaka.

The ferry had been heading to Shariatpur in the south east of the country. Most of the passengers were female daily-wage workers and small children aged between six months and 12 years. Rescuers found 80 bodies trapped in the hull when they salvaged the boat from the riverbed.

The collision occurred at about 2.30am when the passengers were sleeping. One survivor Sohel Hussain said he had been awakened by a loud bang and ran to the upper deck to see what had happened. He heard people yelling for help as he jumped overboard. About 200 people saved their lives by swimming to the riverbank or were rescued by other boats.

According to officials, the bodies of the victims have been recovered from a 45km radius. Relatives have been streaming to the site of the tragedy and to the nearby hospitals. However, the authorities have buried most of the corpses already, claiming that the bodies had decomposed beyond recognition.

The Shipping Department and the Bangladesh Internal Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) have both appointed investigative committees. The captain of the surviving ferry, *MV Jolkapot 11*, was arrested when the ship reached Dhaka and its passengers were questioned. But as in the past, it is unlikely that the

inquiries will address any of the underlying causes.

Prime Minister Sheik Hasina has expressed her “deep regret” over the mishap and the opposition has called on the government to pay compensation to the families of the victims. But like the official investigations these displays of concern by political parties and figures will do nothing to halt ferry accidents that happen with tragic regularity.

Bangladesh is crisscrossed by 230 rivers with ferries one of the main means of transport. Around 2,200 ferries ply 40 of the major rivers. They are often overloaded, poorly equipped and maintained, lacking in safety equipment and operated by untrained skippers and crew. The limited regulations that do exist are frequently not enforced.

Over the last year at least 210 people have died in eight ferry accidents—not counting the latest. In May two disasters occurred in bad weather on the same river within 15 kilometres of each other resulting in a total of 127 deaths. According to the Shipping Department, there have been 249 fatal ferry accidents since 1977 that have claimed 2,221 lives. The section of the Meghna River where the latest disaster took place is notorious, particularly during the monsoon season.

Successive Bangladeshi governments have failed to enforce basic safety conditions. According to Bangladesh's *Daily Star* newspaper: “Ninety per cent of the passenger vessels do not carry life-saving appliances like buoys and lifejackets as required by law, sources say. Some don't even have fire extinguishers, navigation lights and foghorns on board, they add.” Proper documents and passenger lists are not kept.

One senior official admitted that there are only eight inspectors to examine all of the country's ferries. Although ships are meant to be thoroughly checked

every two years for cracks and other signs of structural wear, the inspections often do not take place. In some cases, bribes are paid to corrupt officials to ensure that vessels are allowed to keep operating.

The Bangladeshi press has cited the case of the ferry *Queen of Patuakhali*, a double-decker passenger launch that has sunk three times. On each occasion the vessel has been salvaged, its name changed and it promptly went back into service.

Given that the profits of ship owners invariably predominate over the concerns of the masses of often-poor passengers for life and limb, there is no guarantee that the same will not happen to the *Rajhongashi*.

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