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Ferry fire in Bangladesh claims 41 lives

At least 41 people have died and over 200 were injured early on Friday after a packed three-storey ferry, the MV-Abhijan 10, caught fire on the Sugandha River about 250 kilometres south of Dhaka. In addition to those who died from burns, some drowned after jumping into water to escape the fire. Several others are reported missing. Those with bad burns are currently undergoing treatment at local hospitals.



Ferry fire survivors receive treatment at a government medical hospital in Barishal, Bangladesh, Friday, Dec. 24, 2021. (Source: AP Photo/Niamul Rifat)

The blaze reportedly broke out in the engine room around 3.00 a.m. and rapidly engulfed the ferry, which was carrying over 800 passengers from Dhaka to the town of Barguna.

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Many of the passengers were travelling to visit family and friends for the weekend. The disaster is being reported as the country's worst ferry fire. The capsizing of ferries and other related water-transport accidents occur with sickening regularity in Bangladesh.

Survivors of Friday's fire described the horrifying situation. One passenger, an elderly grandmother, told the AFP that most people had been sleeping when the fire broke out. "My nine-year-old grandson, Nayeem, was with me, he jumped into the river. I don't know what happened to him," she said.

Another woman, who was travelling with her father, sister and six-month-old nephew, said the young child was still missing. "When the fire broke out, I gave the baby to a man. He was trying to save the baby. But now we can't find them," she said.

The true extent of the disaster is not yet clear but with rescue teams still searching for the missing the death toll is likely to rise.

A case has been filed in the Barguna Chief Judicial Magistrate Court against the ferry owner Hamjalal Sheikh and 24 others in connection with the deadly fire. The owner has denied the blaze was caused by a mechanical fault, telling a local news outlet that there was an explosion on the ferry's second storey with the subsequent fire spreading to the engine room.

However, survivors told the *Daily Star* that there were indications of trouble as the journey began but they were ignored. According to the newspaper, workers on the ferry noticed problems with the engine but kept the vessel going while trying to fix them.

A number of passengers said that the engine was making strange loud noises from time to time, black smoke was emanating from the engine room, and that flame flashed from the exhaust pipe on several occasions. The ferry was carrying nearly three times its approved capacity of 310.

Ferry disasters in Bangladesh have resulted in many deaths over the years and mounting public anger at the criminal negligence of government authorities over unsafe conditions in the country's water transport system. Successive Bangladesh governments have failed to minimise the dangers associated water transport, which is cheap and widely used by workers and the poor.

A number of tragedies have already taken place this year. These include the collision in March of a speedboat travelling from Munshiganj to Madaripur with a sand-laden bulk carrier resulting in the death of at least 26 people. In April, the ML Sabit Al Hasan ferry capsized in the Shitalakkhya River in Narayanganj district killing 34.

In June 2020, 34 people died when the MV Morning Bird, which was carrying up to 60 passengers, sunk in the Buriganga River after colliding with a larger ferry, the Mayur-2.

According to Statista, a German-based data analysis company, 9,886 people have died in ferry accidents in Bangladesh between 1966 and 2017—the second highest death toll in the world and just behind the Philippines where 10,855 died during the same period.

Many of these incidents were the result of poor ferry design, inadequate maintenance, poor crew training, inadequate weather information and passenger overloading. The government authorities responsible for enforcing basic safety standards in the ferry transport system turn a blind eye to these conditions, certifying badly maintained and unsafe vessels as seaworthy. Bribery of inspectors and officials is commonplace.

The *Daily Star* has reported that a preliminary investigation into Friday's disaster has revealed that the owner changed two of the ferry's engines without getting permission from authorities. The engine room was also reportedly modified to install a larger-than-approved engine. In addition, the master and crew at the time of the incident were not authorised to operate the vessel.

“Although the two government authorities, the Department of Shipping and Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA), were supposed to check such illegal practices, both of them have failed to do their job,” a transport expert told the newspaper.

As in previous disasters, the government's response has been routine and callous. President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who were visiting the Maldives at the time, issued perfunctory statements of condolence. The prime minister's office said she had asked officials to ensure there was appropriate treatment of the wounded and compensation for the victims.

The Bangladeshi ministry of shipping has formed a seven-member committee, which includes the police, fire service, and district administration, to investigate the fire and

submit a report within 15 working days. This report, like many previous ones, will be a whitewash. At most, a few scapegoats will be arrested and punished in an attempt to dissipate public anger.

Following an inquiry into the Pinak 6 tragedy in 2014 in which more than 100 died, government authorities sacked three staff members of the BIWTA and punished four others. Nothing was done, however, about the report's recommendations in relation to vessels' structural and technical defects, uncertified changes in vessel design, overloading of passengers and goods, irresponsible piloting, and ignoring meteorological department advisories.

Bangladesh has the largest inland water network in the world, with about 700 rivers and tributaries. Ferry owners put passengers' lives at risk in order to maximise their profits by violating basic safety regulations and conspiring with government authorities, which ignore the dangers, or, in the event of a public outcry, make a few cosmetic gestures.

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