

'Wicked Collusion' Is Found in Thousand Deaths on Ferry

By Michael Slackman

April 20, 2006

CAIRO, April 19 - Government incompetence and "wicked collusion" between a ferry owner and a government agency resulted in the drowning of more than 1,000 people in the Red Sea in February when an Egyptian passenger ship sank, according to the findings of a preliminary parliamentary investigation released Wednesday.

Touching the highest levels of government, including President Hosni Mubarak and the military command, though without directly naming either, the report crushed the government's earlier efforts to blame the captain alone for the sinking of the ferry, Al Salam Boccaccio 98. The captain, Sayyed Omar, left the ship before it sank, witnesses said, but has not been accounted for.

The report, by a committee of 23 members of Parliament, directly attributed the disaster to the Egyptian Authority on Maritime Safety and to the ship's owner, Al Salam Maritime Transport Company, which is controlled by Mamdouh Ismail, a member of the upper house of Parliament appointed by President Mubarak.

The report's authors vowed "to beat with an iron fist on everyone who allowed himself to tamper with the standards, laws and rules for the sake of achieving cheap worldly gains, even if the cost was to kill people, drowning and destroying the lives of many Egyptian families and spreading calamity and catastrophe across Egypt."

The document found fault at many levels: with a political system that allowed Mr. Ismail to run a ferry service while also serving in Parliament; with the maritime authority responsible for overseeing the ports; and with a military-affiliated command that began a rescue operation hours after receiving a distress signal with the location of the ship.

The committee also castigated the government for failing to provide facilities for family members who showed up at the port.

After bodies were recovered, the report said, "it was up to those who wanted to identify the body of a relative for burial to roam between hospitals and morgues across 10 different cities and thousands of kilometers to go through the faces of the dead."

The government did not respond to the report. Magdy Rady, the government's chief spokesman, did not return calls or text messages asking for comment.

"We are not going to let go, because this is a country's reputation and people's lives," said Muhammad Anwar Essmat el-Sadat, a member of Parliament who helped write the report. "We insist on following this."

The ferry went down in the Red Sea just after midnight on Feb. 3, en route from Duba, Saudi Arabia, to Safaga, Egypt. The ship was about 35 years old and packed with more than 1,400 passengers when it sank. Most of those on board were Egyptians returning for a visit after going to find jobs in Saudi Arabia.

The report was forthright in linking the tragedy to an overall atmosphere of cronyism and corruption. But the findings only confirmed what human rights organizations, families of those lost at sea and members of Parliament have been saying since the ship sank: that it was overcrowded and in poor condition, and that the government agencies responsible for ensuring public safety had failed in their mandates.

"Even though this is only the initial report, it is very disturbing because it says that there is collusion and corruption," said Muhammad Saad el-Katatny, a member of Parliament who represents the largest opposition bloc, made up of independents linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.

The ship's owner, Mr. Ismail, left Egypt and has been staying in London, where he could not be reached for comment. He has steadfastly insisted that he and his company are innocent of any wrongdoing.

In a full-page advertisement earlier this month in Al Ahram, the semiofficial Egyptian newspaper, he said a British insurer had concluded that the ship was fitted with all necessary safety equipment.

Hesham Kassem, a human rights worker and opposition leader, said that in spite of the report, he had little hope that those responsible would be held accountable. He questioned the government's allowing Mr. Ismail to leave Egypt before asking Parliament to lift his parliamentary immunity so he could be questioned.

Mr. Kassem said he doubted anyone would be prosecuted because, he noted, the prosecutor was appointed by the president.

"I wouldn't dare to call it a step toward accountability," Mr. Kassem said of the report. "The minimum is, something like this should come out. We have seen many cases like this that should have been prosecuted properly, and they are shelved."

Mona el-Naggar contributed reporting for this article.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 12 of the National edition with the headline: 'Wicked Collusion' Is Found In Thousand Deaths on Ferry