

EGYPTIAN FERRY SINKS IN RED SEA

Egyptian Ferry Sinks in Red Sea; 1,000 May Be Lost

By Hassan M. Fattah

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DUBAI, United Arab Emirates, Saturday, Feb. 4 - A ferry carrying more than 1,400 passengers and crew, most of them Egyptian laborers returning from Saudi Arabia, sank Friday about 40 miles off the coast of Egypt, and by late evening, only 324 people had been rescued.

Egyptian officials said most of the survivors had escaped on lifeboats, with a few plucked directly from the waters of the Red Sea. But as rescuers working late into Friday recovered more and more bodies, hopes of finding additional survivors faded.

Egyptian coast guard vessels, assisted by the Saudi coast guard, were engaged in a large search effort where the ship went down. The cause is under investigation.

A spokesman for President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt raised questions about the ferry's safety measures, including whether it had enough lifeboats.

The 35-year-old Egyptian ship, Al Salam Boccaccio 98, sailing under a Panamanian flag, was traveling a regular route between Duba, Saudi Arabia, and Safaga, Egypt, and was carrying Egyptians returning home for vacation. Also among the passengers, an Egyptian security official said, were 100 Saudis and one Canadian; at least 20 were children.

Hundreds of relatives gathered in Safaga on Friday begging for information about their family members, and expressing anger at the authorities. More than 130 of the survivors had been transferred to Safaga Hospital by nightfall, and the rest were expected there before dawn.

But for most of those who huddled outside the police line at the port, time was not on their side. The Associated Press said late Friday that only 324 people had been rescued.

Muhammad Abdel Al, 42, speaking by cellphone from Safaga, said he had traveled from the Upper Egyptian village of Abu Tisht in Qena Province, to meet his brother, Yemeni Abdel Al, who was returning from work in Kuwait.

"No one knows anything about anything, nothing about the survivors," Mr. Abdel Al

said. "We're lost, and there are a million of us here."

Al Salam Boccaccio left the port of Duba about 7 p.m. Thursday, destined for Safaga, about 120 miles across the Red Sea, and was scheduled to arrive at 3 a.m. local time. It did not issue a distress signal, but officials said it dropped off radar screens around 2 a.m.

It was not clear what caused the ship to go down, but government officials and the ferry's owners, Al Salaam Maritime Transport, said high winds and a sandstorm on the Saudi side of the Red Sea might have played a role.

Mamdouh al-Orabi, manager of Salaam Maritime Transport, said that 65-mile-per-hour winds kicked up heavy waves on Thursday night and that the ship was "especially susceptible" under such conditions.

According to The Associated Press, Mr. Orabi said shipping agents had become concerned about the boat and had informed another of their ships, headed eastward from Safaga to Duba, to be on the lookout. The ship reported back that it had sighted people on a lifeboat, and the company alerted the Egyptian authorities, Mr. Orabi said.

The ship, a so-called roll-on, roll-off vessel, carried 22 cars and several trucks when it set sail, below its capacity. It had 539 first-class and 422 second-class berths, and could accommodate 226 deck passengers and 300 Pullman seats, according to Al Salaam Maritime.

In a statement on Egyptian television, Suleiman Awad, a spokesman for Mr. Mubarak, questioned the safety measures on the boat, but the transport minister, Muhammad Lutfy Mansour, told the Egyptian Middle East News Agency that the ship had complied with all requirements.

Mr. Awad said, "The speed at which the ship sank and the fact there were not enough life rafts on board seem to confirm there was a problem, but we cannot speak before the results of an investigation."

Mr. Mubarak had ordered military planes and the navy to expand the search-and-rescue operation on Friday morning, he said.

The United States Navy provided a P3-Orion patrol plane to help in the search, but offers to divert warships operating in the area, including the Bulwark, a British ship, were turned down, said Cmdr. Jeff Breslau, a spokesman for the United States Fifth Fleet, based in Bahrain.

Roll-on, roll-off ferries have proved to be among the more dangerous in recent decades. In 1987, a British roll-on, roll-off ferry capsized off the Belgian coast when water poured into the car deck, killing more than 190 people on board. In 1994, more than 800 were

killed after a similar ship traveling between Estonia and Sweden began to take on water when fierce waves smashed open its bow doors.

Last October, another ship owned by Al Salaam Maritime collided with a cargo ship at the southern entrance to the Suez Canal, The A.P. reported, causing a stampede of passengers that left 2 dead and 40 injured.

Some of the survivors of Friday's accident were found in the ferry's lifeboats, while others piled onto inflatable rescue skiffs dropped by helicopters and still others were pulled from the water wearing life jackets, the governor of Red Sea Province, Bakr al-Rashidi, told The A.P.

For the millions of Egyptian workers who leave home with hopes of finding prosperity in the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea crossing is a lifeline to better jobs and better pay, and far cheaper than an airplane ticket. They work in the gulf, leaving families behind for years with the goal of one day returning wealthy men.

Ayman Gaber, 28, went to Safaga on Friday night when he heard about the ferry. His cousin Sabri el-Saman, 36, left only six months ago to work in a Saudi hotel. He was returning home to see his family after his father had died. But he called to tell Mr. Gaber that he would be arriving late.

"He said, Don't worry if I'm late because the ship is late," Mr. Gaber said. "I found out at 1 p.m. on TV, and there's absolutely no information."

Mona el-Naggar contributed reporting from Cairo for this article.

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