



Travel

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Sunk ferry 'may have been short of lifeboats'

- **Roll-on, roll-off ferry sinks off Egypt**
- **Over 1,000 people missing**
- **203 rescued, minister says**

Staff and agencies

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The Egyptian car ferry that sank in the Red Sea with up to 1,500 people on board may not have had enough lifeboats to carry the passengers and crew, a presidential spokesman suggested tonight.

Over 1,000 people are missing after the Salam Boccaccio 98 sank overnight some 40 miles off the Egyptian port of Hurghada.

An Egyptian official said "dozens of bodies" had been pulled from the water and the Egyptian transport minister, Mohammed Lufti Mansour, said 203 survivors had been rescued. Fears were rising for the rest of the 1,300-1,500 people said to have been on board.

"The swift sinking of the ferry and the lack of sufficient lifeboats suggests there was some violation, but we cannot say until the investigation is complete," Suleiman Awad, a spokesman for the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, said, quoted by the semi-official news agency MENA.

Around 1,400 passengers, along with a crew of 98, were on board, Mr Awad said. Mahfouz Taha Marzouk, the head of the Egyptian maritime authority, said there were 1,318 people on board including a crew of 96.

Officials said the ferry probably went down at around 2am local time (2300 GMT), when most of the passengers would have been asleep.

Four Egyptian frigates arrived 10 hours after the ship sank and are still at the scene.

The cause of the disaster was not immediately known, although there were high winds and a sandstorm near Dubah, on Saudi Arabia's west coast, during the night.

The Salam Boccaccio 98 set off from Dubah at 7pm last night. It was making the 120-mile trip across the Red Sea to the southern Egyptian port of Safaga - roughly opposite Dubah - when the disaster happened.

It was a 36-year-old roll-on, roll-off type of ferry, similar to the British Herald of Free Enterprise, which capsized with the loss of 193 lives in 1987.

David Osler, the industrial editor of the Lloyds List shipping paper, said that style of ferry had a "big question mark" over its stability.

He said that, if there was bad weather, "it would only take a bit of water to get on board this ship and it would be all over". He added: "The percentage of this type of ferry involved in this type of disaster is huge."

A distress signal from the ship was picked up last night at the rescue coordination centre at RAF Kinloss in Scotland before being passed on to Egypt via France.

Passengers were plunged into the Red Sea, which has an average temperature of around 19C (66F) at this time of year.

Helicopter crews reported seeing dozens of bodies in the sea, and continuing bad weather was hampering rescue efforts, which involved helicopters, planes, frigates and a number of Saudi naval vessels.

A British warship, the HMS Bulwark, is once again en route to the scene after an earlier decision that it was not needed was reversed. However, the first sea lord, Admiral Sir Alan West, said it would take around 24 hours to arrive.

"I have been up and down the sea lanes there many times over 40 years and it can be very, very tricky," the admiral told the BBC's PM programme. "You get very nasty winds, normally from the northerly quadrant. You get a short, steep swell and the mist that builds up carries an awful lot of sand. You can get some very unpleasant visibility and unpleasant sea state."

The ferry's passengers were reported to have mainly been Egyptians. Many Egyptians work in Saudi Arabia and a number of passengers were thought to have been returning from the annual hajj pilgrimage to Mecca, which ended last month.

The agent for the ship in Saudi Arabia, Farid al-Douadi, said there were around 220 vehicles on board, and that the ship had the capacity to hold 2,500 passengers. Hundreds of relatives waited for news at Safaga, where the ship had been scheduled to dock at 3am local time.

The ferry, which was 118 metres long and weighed 1,779 gross tonnes, was owned by the Egyptian El-Salam Maritime Transport Company.

Mohammed Lutfy Mansour, the Egyptian transport minister, said it had met safety requirements. "The number of passengers on board is less than the maximum number of people," he added.

It passed a structural safety check last June, and an international management code audit in October revealed "nothing significant to report", according to Registro Italiano Navale, the company that carried out the checks. It had verified the ship's stability in October 2003.

Mr Osler told Guardian Unlimited the Salem Boccaccio 98 had been built at the Castellamare di Stabia shipyard, near Naples, in 1970.

It was involved in a collision with several other boats in a port in Cyprus in July 1998, but he said he had not been aware of any significant damage or casualties resulting from that incident.

A ship owned by the same company, which was also carrying pilgrims, collided with a cargo ship at the southern entrance to the Suez canal in October, causing a stampede among passengers trying to escape as it sank. Two people were killed and 40 injured.

A Foreign Office spokeswoman said there were not believed to have been any British citizens on board.

The foreign secretary, Jack Straw, heard news of the disaster as he met his Sudanese counterpart, Lam Akol, in London, and said some of the victims may have been Sudanese.

"I hope you will accept our condolences for the loss of life, just as our hearts go out to all those who we think have suffered so badly in this tragedy," he told Mr Akol.

Mr Straw said British embassy staff in Cairo, Khartoum and Riyadh were "doing everything they can to help and a regional deployment team could be despatched to the area if necessary".

The worst shipping disaster of recent years happened in 2002 when a Senegalese ferry, the Joola, capsized off the Gambian coast with the loss of 1,863 people. It had been designed to carry only 550.

More than 4,300 people died in the worst peacetime shipping disaster when the Dona Pez ferry collided with a tanker in the Sibuyan Sea in 1987.
