

Beat: News

Death toll from Philippine ferry disaster reaches 108

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USPA News - Divers near the central Philippine port of Cebu have recovered fourteen more bodies from a ferry that sank last month after colliding with a cargo vessel, raising the death toll from the disaster to at least 108, authorities said on Monday. The Philippine Coast Guard said divers had recovered fourteen more bodies since the last update on Thursday morning, putting the total death toll at 108. Recovery operations were continuing on Monday for 29 other people who remain unaccounted for and are presumed to have drowned in the sinking.

The accident occurred at around 9:03 p.m. local time on August 16 when the cargo vessel M/V Sulpicio Express 7 collided with the passenger vessel M/V St. Thomas Aquinas near Talisay City in central Cebu province. The cargo vessel had 38 crew members on board while the ferry was carrying 870 people, including 754 passengers and 116 crew members. The captain of the ferry, Reynan Bermejo, told investigators on August 23 that his vessel was inbound on the inbound lane of the traffic separation scheme when the ship's radar picked up the M/V Sulpicio Express 7. Attempts were made to communicate with the cargo ship, but no answer was received. Bermejo testified that he ordered hard port to turn the vessel to the left in order to avoid a collision, but the cargo ship then also maneuvered to the right, resulting in the collision. He explained that he had not been able to maneuver to starboard because of the shallow waters, and stopping the vessel would have taken too long. Previously, the ferry's owner, 2GO Shipping, said the crew of the M/V St. Thomas distributed life jackets to the passengers and carried out emergency abandon-ship procedures after the powerful collision. A major search-and-rescue operation, involving both ships and helicopters, was then launched. Rescue workers were able to rescue a total of 733 people in the immediate aftermath, including all 38 crew members on board the M/V Sulpicio Express 7. A number of survivors were taken to hospitals in Talisay and Cebu City, while other survivors were provided with temporary shelter, hot meals and clothes. 2GO Shipping said its ferry was coming from Surigao and Nasipit port and was expected to arrive in Cebu City as a stopover port at 10 p.m. local time, before continuing to the capital Manila. It said the vessel had a maximum capacity of 1,010 passengers and crew and 160 units of 20 footer containers, although it was only carrying 104 such containers. Accidents at sea are common in the Philippines due to severe weather, poor maintenance of boats and weak enforcement of safety regulations. At least 690 people were killed in June 2008 when the ferry MV Princess of the Stars capsized and sank during a powerful typhoon off the coast of San Fernando in the central province of Romblon. The world's worst ever peacetime maritime disaster also occurred in the Philippines. An estimated 4,341 people were killed in December 1987 when the passenger ferry MV Dona Paz collided with the oil tanker MT Vector in the Tablas Strait, not far from the central province of Marinduque.

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