



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (31/2006)

*IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.*

---

## FERRY SAFETY: A NEGLECTED ASPECT OF MARITIME SECURITY?

Sam Bateman\*

3 May 2006

### A Saga of Tragedies

The tragic deaths of four Singaporeans when a ferry sank off the coast of Bahrain on 29 March drove home the grim reality that many more people lose their lives in ferry accidents each year than in aircraft crashes. Altogether 57 people died in the Bahrain tragedy but this was just one of several ferry disasters that have occurred already in 2006.

On February 3, the large Egyptian ferry *Al Salam Boccacio* sank while en route from Saudi Arabia to Egypt, causing the deaths of more than 1,000 passengers and crew. At least 50 people were missing after a ferry with about 150 people on board sank in a river in southern Bangladesh on 27 February. Then just a few days after the Bahrain ferry tragedy, another ferry sank off the coast of Djibouti with about 70 deaths.

These are not isolated incidents. Ferry accidents occur around the world. The Canadian ferry *Queen of the North* sank after running aground off the coast of British Columbia on March 22 this year. However, the waters of the Middle East, Bangladesh, the Philippines and Indonesia, where ferries are a common means of transport, are the ones most prone to ferry accidents.

The worst peacetime maritime disaster ever in terms of loss of life occurred on 20 December 1987 when the Philippine ferry *Dona Paz* caught fire and sank after a collision. The *Dona Paz* was on her way to Manila when it collided with the motor tanker *Vector*, fully loaded with petroleum products. The collision ignited an intense fire that annihilated the two ships. About 4,400 people died. Many of the victims were families on their way home for the Christmas holidays.

In another horrific ferry accident on the other side of the world, the large ferry *Estonia* sank in the Baltic in the early hours of 28 September 1994 while on passage from Tallinn to Stockholm. At least 852 people perished. Passengers had less than 15 minutes warning before the ship sank. Most of the survivors were young men. Women, children and the elderly stood little chance. Subsequent investigations showed that the main cause of the sinking was the failure in heavy weather of a badly-designed bow door.

Widespread panic is a common feature of ferry accidents. There may be many people confined within the limits of the ship's hull and superstructure. When they realise something is wrong, they try to get out through crowded and restricted companion ways that may

already be blocked by fire or flood, or the vessel might be listing with decks becoming walls and vice versa. Many will not know safe exit routes and become totally disoriented.

### **Maritime Security Implications**

Ferry safety is an important maritime security issue. There are three main considerations. First, maritime safety and security are closely related. In the past it was normal in the shipping sector to make a distinction between safety and security, but this changed following 9/11 and safety and security are now inextricably linked. This new emphasis was reflected in the International Maritime Organization (IMO) changing its motto from “safer ships, cleaner oceans” to “safe, secure and efficient shipping on clean oceans”.

The IMO introduced the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code, which entered into force on 1 July 2004. It provides a comprehensive range of mandatory measures for ship security, including the need for each ship to have a Ship Security Plan and a designated Ship Security Officer, and to conduct regular training, drills and exercises. The ISPS Code applies to all ships over 500 gross tonnage, and to all passenger vessels, employed on international voyages. Thus it covers ferries operating between Singapore and adjacent Indonesian islands, but it does not apply to the large ferries operating within the Indonesian and Philippine archipelagos unless it is specifically extended by national legislation.

The second factor is that terrorists appreciate the consequences of a ferry disaster. They know that cruise vessels and ferries might have iconic value, and that an attack on one of them could cause many casualties with maximum public impact. The bomb attack on the Philippine passenger ferry *Superferry 14* off Manila in February 2004 constitutes the most serious maritime terrorist attack. At least 63 people were killed and 53 others missing presumed dead. Similar bomb attacks have occurred on other ferries both in Indonesia and the Philippines but with fewer loss of life. The problem is not so much the actual explosion but the fire and panic that invariably follow. The terrorist bomb did not sink the *Superferry 14* but rather the subsequent fire. More effective fire-fighting and evacuation procedures may well have saved the ship and many lives.

The last implication for maritime security planners is that ferry security is generally an under-appreciated problem, despite the best intentions of the ISPS Code. The public understands and accepts the need for aviation security. We know that aircraft occasionally crash but may not also appreciate that ships sometimes sink. We are accustomed to pre-flight briefings by cabin crew before an airline flight, but what about before a ferry trip or cruise? There may be a briefing on life-jackets and lifeboat stations but evacuation guidance is rarely provided.

### **What can be done?**

The actions required to deal with this situation are at the individual, national and regional levels. Safety and security begin with the individual. Many ferry tragedies occur because of overloading, or when passengers all move to one side of an already overloaded vessel. Before a ferry trip or a cruise, we should check that the vessel is not overloaded. And once onboard, not only should we check for life-jackets and other life-saving appliances, but we should also ensure we know how to get out and off the vessel should there be an emergency. These precautions apply as much to a short “bum boat” ride on Singapore River, or to a ferry ride to Batam, as to a cruise on a large cruise liner.

At a national level, appropriate regulations are required to ensure the safety and security of cruise liners and passenger ferries. The ISPS Code should be extended to all passenger ferries even though they may not be employed on international voyages. Spot checks should also be carried out on ferries to ensure they are complying with regulations. An all too common feature of ferry accidents has been the unscrupulous behaviour of ferry owners in overloading their vessels to maximise financial returns.

At a regional level, cooperative contingency arrangements are required for managing a major disaster involving a cruise liner or passenger ferry, including a terrorist attack. There is extensive ferry traffic across the Malacca and Singapore Straits and more cruise liners are operating in the area. An incident involving one of these vessels would be extremely demanding for local authorities and would require close cooperation between the littoral countries. The joint agency Maritime Incident Response Groups (MIRG), recently introduced in the United Kingdom to provide specialised fire and rescue services for dealing with incidents at sea, are a possible model for Singapore and other regional countries.

---

\* Sam Bateman is a Senior Fellow in the Maritime Security Programme at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.