

Third (and First) World Ferry Accidents – “Tragic Misfortunes,” or Predictable Consequences?

James S. Henry

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Evidently January 31st is not the best day of the year to take a ferry ride. This marks the 50th anniversary of one of the **worst ferry disasters** in the UK's history – the 1953 sinking of the [Princess Victoria](#), a British Rail car ferry that was caught out in unusually stormy seas in the Irish Sea, with the loss of 130 lives. And just today, in **northwest Congo**, an overloaded ferry caught fire and sank on [the Congo](#) with the loss of at least 200 lives.

Such ferry mishaps have long been a staple item of disaster news all over the globe. With few exceptions, most conventional media coverage presents them -- and of course the damage done by mudslides, forest fires, and earthquakes as well -- as "tragic accidents," the almost-unavoidable byproducts of happenstantial factors like overcrowding, bad weather, crew mistakes, fires, and collisions that are (ala Les Liason Dangereux)"beyond our control."

However, a closer look reveals that much more **systemic factors** are also often at work, not only in the Third World, but also in the First.

STATEN ISLAND “MISHAP”?

The **Staten Island Ferry**, the US' second most popular, is normally safe and reliable. It carries an average of 70,000 people back and forth each day to Manhattan. So New Yorkers were shocked last October when the 3335-ton ferry plowed into the docks on Staten Island at 17 knots, killing 11 people and injuring at least 42.

As a result, financially-strapped New York City has already been sued for more than \$3 billion in damages, and has had to ask a court to invoke a maritime statute that may limit its liability to the value of the vessel -- a paltry \$14.4 million.

But this limitation could depend on where the blame is ultimately placed. Initially the City tried to place it entirely on individual crew members – for example, a possible medication-induced blackout by the [pilot](#), the alleged absence of the ferry's captain from the wheelhouse, and the possibility that other crew members may have been playing cards rather than [keeping watch](#).

However, since Federal prosecutors and the US Department of Transportation's (DOT's) [National Transportation Safety Board](#) have entered the investigation, it seems that other more systemic contributing factors are emerging. These include the Port Captain's alleged failure to distribute and enforce [safety rules](#), the absence of state-of-the-art navigational equipment and [warning systems](#) that are routinely used, for example, on Seattle's ferries, and inadequate [training programs](#) for crew members. There also appears to be a general pattern of nepotism and corruption in the management of the entire Staten Island ferry system.

While it is premature to reach final conclusions about the relative influence of these various factors, it is already clear that the "pure accident" theory of this event -- the worst accident in Staten Island Ferry history -- is inadequate.

THIRD WORLD FERRY "ACCIDENTS"?

The residents of sub-Saharan Africa, as well as countries like Bangladesh, the Philippines, Indonesia, and China, are intimately familiar with all these pathologies. They must have marveled at the attention that was showered on the comparatively small Staten Island accident by the global media. After all, these countries routinely suffer ferry accidents that take hundreds and even thousands of lives.

We've already noted the latest Congo River mishap. A cursory review of other accident reports shows that in 2003 alone, another Congo ferry "accident" claimed [163 lives](#), one in Bangladesh claimed "[hundreds](#)," and there were others in [Tanzania](#), [Somalia](#), [Zambia](#), and [Burundi](#) that took an average of fifty lives each. In 2002, yet another Bangladesh ferry "accident" claimed [300 lives](#), one in Indonesia took [60](#), and in Senegal, a ferry loaded with [1800 people](#), twice its capacity, flipped over, with no survivors. There have been literally hundreds of other such sinkings. The all-time record appears to have been a Philippines sinking in 1987 that claimed [4,341 lives](#) – the greatest number of ocean fatalities in nautical history.

Of course any one of these incidents, taken in isolation, may be understood as a "tragic mishap." But from a slight distance, what is most striking is how repetitive they are – not only in terms of the specific countries involved, but also the very same locations in the rivers and oceans, the very same ferry owners, the same regulatory authorities, and in some cases even the same (salvaged) vessels.

(Indeed, in the case of the Staten Island Ferry, the most recent 2003 incident had similar, though much less costly, [precursors](#) in 1998, 1992, 1978, and perhaps others.)

All this suggests that, as is now coming to light in Staten Island, that what we have here are not just random accidents and errors, but recurrent market and regulatory failures.

In particular, the fact is that, especially (but not exclusively) in the developing world, ferry owners – whether public or private -- almost never face any substantial civil liabilities or criminal sanctions for such mishaps after the fact, and the safety and training regulations that they implement before the fact are often wanting.

Furthermore, as in the case of New York City's efforts to limit liability, lawsuits in these countries may not afford any adequate relief where ferries are state-owned. And pursuing them is also often beyond the means of the victims' families.

Given this after-the-fact impunity, there is little incentive for ferry owners or managers to enforce restrictions against overcrowding, or to invest in adequate crew screening, training, and drug testing, as well as up-to-date navigational and safety equipment. **New Yorkers, be warned....**

The implication is that unless such conditions change, those of us who relish a regular diet of "tragic ferry accidents," especially from the Third World, are unlikely to be disappointed. **"Oh, the horror....."**



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