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At Least 129 Dead in Volga River Tragedy

By Alexander Bratersky

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Tatarstan President Rustam Minnikhanov, right front, and emergency workers particpating in search and rescue efforts on the Volga River on Monday.

The "Volga Titanic" sank in three minutes with the music still playing, and at least two passing ships ignored survivors, said passengers who managed to reach shore after the weekend tragedy.

The decrepit Bulgaria riverboat, which was carrying at least 208 people, capsized Sunday in the Volga River in Tatarstan, killing at least 129, including about 30 children, officials said Monday.

An investigation into Russia's worst maritime disaster in 25 years was in full swing Monday, but the actual cause appeared to have been a lack of air conditioning — which prompted the crew to open portholes that were then flooded by an incoming wave.

President Dmitry Medvedev declared a national day of mourning for Tuesday. He also ordered checks into all passenger transportation in the country, not only riverboats.

Emergency workers were working on the sunken boat late Monday, with more than 300 divers deployed to search the wreck and the surrounding area for bodies, Emergency Situations Minister Sergei Shoigu said, Interfax reported. Robots had to be used to reach the ship's hold, his deputy Vadim Seregin told RIA-Novosti.

The final death toll could not be established because it remained unclear how many people were on board. Officials reported 79 survivors and 54 recovered bodies. But the Emergency Situations Ministry said at least 75 more people had been on board, bringing the toll to 129.

The Bulgaria was sailing from the Tatarstan town of Bolgar to the regional capital, Kazan, for a weekend river cruise. It sank while executing a turn about three kilometers from shore.

Passengers had no time to deploy most lifeboats, but many used lifejackets, the Investigative Committee said. Shoigu said divers who examined locked portholes found evidence that people had tried to break them from inside.

There may have been as many as 50 children on board. Thirty to 40 of them assembled in an inside hall for an entertainment program right before the sinking and drowned there, a source with the rescue effort told Interfax. The only way to recover the children's bodies will be to raise the boat to the surface, the source said.

Shoigu told journalists that the recovery effort would be handled by the same research institute that oversaw the recovery of the Kursk nuclear submarine after it sank in the Barents Sea in 2000.

A surviving passenger, Ruslan Zabirov, said music was playing on the loudspeakers in his family's cabin until the last minute, and no S.O.S. signal was issued, Itar-Tass reported. Officials said the Bulgaria went under in three minutes.

Survivors tried to drag other people from the water into two lifeboats that managed to deploy in time, but they struggled and failed because the bodies were slippery from spilled motor oil, Zabirov said.

Another survivor, Nikolai Chernov, said survivors spent about 90 minutes in the cold water before being rescued by other ships, including the cruise vessel Arabella, local news web site Tatar-inform.ru reported. Some swam to shore.

Chernov said at least two ships passed by without stopping to help. He identified one as Volganeft and said the other was a barge.

Crew member Svetlana Alexeyeva said the passenger ship Meteor was also in the vicinity, but its passengers filmed the people in the water on their mobile phones instead of helping them, according to Tatar-inform.ru.

The local branch of Emergency Situations Ministry said there were no ships matching Chernov's description in the area at the time of the disaster, Itar-Tass reported. But Tatarstan leader Rustam Minnikhanov said officials were nevertheless looking into the reports.

Police were sent to the area as a preventive measure against potential looters.

The Emergency Situations Ministry said the ship was carrying 35 crewmembers, 148 tourists and 25 "unregistered passengers," RIA-Novosti reported.

Thirty-six children who died on the Bulgaria all had the same birth date — Dec. 30, 1999 — on the passenger manifest, indicating that they were allowed to board without their identification documents, said ministry official Marat Rakhmatullin.

The Bulgaria was overloaded and had no authorization to transport passengers, a spokeswoman for the Prosecutor General's Office, Marina Gridnyova, told Interfax. The ship also had a malfunctioning left engine and a starboard list, she said.

No official version of the incident was voiced Monday, but a source close to the investigation told Interfax that the open portholes appeared to have been the crucial factor.

Bad weather also might have contributed. No storm warning was issued for the area Sunday, but local investigators said surviving crewmembers reported squalls shortly before the ship sank.

Bloggers speculated that the ship might have hit a sandbank, but the Investigative Committee said the river was 18 meters deep in the area of the incident.

Valery Kirchanov, director of the ship's owner, the Kamskoye Rechnoye Parokhodstvo company, said the Bulgaria had been leased to the Argorechtur company, which had a license to transport passengers, Interfax reported. Argorechtur manned the ship with its own crew, he said.

Kirchanov also said flooding through portholes was the most likely explanation for the sinking. He dismissed reports that the ship had been poorly maintained, saying the authorities would not have allowed it to sail if it had been in disrepair.

But a forum discussion on the industry web site Flot.ru earlier this month claimed hat the Bulgaria was in a "sorry state" and that its owner did not care. Gridnyova, of the Prosecutor General's Office, said investigators were looking into the officials who had authorized the Bulgaria to sail.

The Bulgaria's radio operator told Itar-Tass that the ship had experienced problems during its last voyage. "The ship was sailing on one engine at the time of the disaster. The engine broke down before the stop in Bolgar, and crewmembers and passengers protested against sailing further. But the captain didn't communicate with the people and decided to sail," the unidentified operator said.

Argorechtur representatives were unavailable for comment Monday.

The sinking is the biggest Russian maritime disaster since a 1986 fire on the cruise ship Admiral Nakhimov in the Black Sea killed more than 400 people. This is also the first time that a national day of mourning has been declared since a 2009 fire in a Perm nightclub killed 156.

But the disaster, already dubbed "Volga Titanic" by bloggers, has not impacted the tourist

industry, with next to no cancellations for bookings on river cruises, said Maya Lomidze of the Association of Tour Operators of Russia.

She also said each passenger on the Bulgaria was insured for more than 500,000 rubles ($17,600), but did not identify the insurer, Interfax reported. It also remained unclear whether the unregistered passengers were also covered by the insurance.

Of the 120 river cruise ships currently operating in European Russia, 50 are 25 to 30 years old and the other 70 are older than 40 years, the Association of Tour Operators of Russia said in a statement. The Transportation Ministry said 100 of Russia's 1,500 river vessels were built before 1956, the Vzglyad news site reported.

"There is not a single new river boat in use today," Yury Gorbachev, general designer at the Shipbuilding Engineering Center in St. Petersburg, said by telephone.

However, even 60-year-old ships like the Bulgaria can be safe if maintained properly, said Valentin Razhivin, a former ship captain who has worked on ships of Bulgaria's type.

"It was a reliable model," Razhivin, a researcher at the Institute of Water Transport in Moscow, said by telephone, adding that this was the first incident involving Bulgaria types.

The river fleet is almost exclusively in private hands, and the state has all but ignored it, said Vladimir Klimenko, who sits on the State Duma's Transportation Committee.

"Who takes care of them? It's impossible to understand," Klimenko said in remarks carried by Kommersant FM radio.

Medvedev echoed his words, telling transportation officials during an emergency meeting to step up control over the country's ships to prevent similar tragedies in the future.

"The numbers of old buckets we still have sailing is mind-boggling," Medvedev said. "We have gotten away with it until now, but such things could have happened before — and now they have happened with the worst possible consequences."

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