

# Lessons from Manila

An alliance between government and industry stakeholders has led to a drastic reduction in ferry fatalities in the Philippines – and may prove a “paramount prerequisite” for improved safety in other Asian and African countries, members of the FerrySafe project team are discovering

A team established by industry association Interferry is currently collating data, views and opinions from the ferry sector in the Philippines, in a bid to learn how the country has managed to achieve an impressive decline in ferry-related fatalities over the past decade.

Working under the banner of the FerrySafe project, the team is keen to establish whether the actions taken to reduce accidents in the Philippines can be identified and applied to other developing nations, especially those plagued by high casualty rates.

This initiative has received £40,000 (about US\$51,800) of funding from the Lloyd’s Register (LR) Foundation, which earlier this year published its *Insight report on safety in the passenger ferry industry* – a document highlighting the fact that the global ferry sector has averaged more than 1,000 fatalities per year since the 1960s, with most deaths having been recorded in Africa and Asia.

## Ongoing mission

Promoting domestic ferry safety in developing nations has been an ongoing mission for Interferry for quite some time. In 2005, the industry teamed up with IMO to launch an initial 10-year project focused on this goal, and with an emphasis on domestic routes within the ‘BIP’ trio of countries, comprising Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines. According to the LR Foundation report, 163 passenger ferry accidents were recorded globally between 2002-2016, resulting in 17,000 deaths. Of these, 25% were recorded in Bangladesh; 16% in Indonesia; and 11% in the Philippines. Concurrently, 6% of related fatalities were logged in China, while the rest of the world (ROW) made up the remaining 42%.

Interferry has stated: “Safety issues on domestic ferry routes in developing nations...account for 93% of an almost certainly under-estimated 1,200 fatalities per year.” The aim of the 10-year Interferry project was to highlight dangerous vessel

designs and practices and promote a safe ferry culture in the worst affected areas.

Although some progress was made – including the creation of crew training programmes, upgrading of maritime administration documents to electronic format and introduction of schemes to enhance local boatbuilder skillsets – it was nonetheless a slow haul, as one might expect, given the vast geographical spread.

In the interests of fairness, it should also be pointed out that ferry safety is not just a critical issue for ‘developing nations’; one need only recall the 2012 grounding of *Costa Concordia* or the 2014 blaze aboard *Norman Atlantic* to realise that operators in ‘developed’ nations can also suffer the catastrophic effects of complacency and bad practice.

## Identifying “root causes”

Much of the blame for ferry fatalities in Asia and Africa can be attributed to human factors. However, the LR Foundation report acknowledges that, alongside perennial problems such as passenger overcrowding, inadequate crew/coxswain training and lack of life-saving appliances, “very poor vessel design and/or construction, leading to small vessels that are unseaworthy” also contribute to the overall death toll.

The report even suggests that ‘unseaworthiness’ may be the leading “root cause” of ferry fatalities in Bangladesh, being deemed responsible for 50% of incidents (in contrast, ‘overloading’ and ‘crew incompetence’ were each identified as accounting for 25% of fatalities within that country). Vessel unseaworthiness could also be behind 30% of ferry fatalities in Indonesia and 18% of related deaths in the Philippines, the report adds.

The LR Foundation report concludes by recommending the creation of a “non-profit and at least partially ferry operator-funded organisation, dedicated to improving safety in the industry”. Perhaps a natural fit for the



Johan Roos, Interferry: “Government oversight on prohibiting worst practices... will be fundamental to the safety regime in developing countries”

task, Interferry responded by launching the FerrySafe project, selecting Manila as a good starting point for its current campaign.

## Manila meetings

The Philippines has managed to curtail its tally of ferry incident-related fatalities from 1,001 in 2008 to virtually nil in both 2017 and 2018 (see Figure 1). If it’s possible to identify the causes of this decline, could this info be used to inspire similar safety improvements in other Asian and African countries?

To find out, March 2019 saw four FerrySafe project team members assemble in the Sofitel Philippine Plaza Hotel in the capital of Manila, to host a series of informal, one-hour meetings with various Filipinos linked to the national ferry sector.

The FerrySafe representatives comprised: Johan Roos, Interferry regulatory affairs director; Edwin Pang, general manager and naval architect at marine consultancy Leadship, and chair of RINA’s committee at IMO; Nelson Dela Cruz, a volunteer writer and researcher and member of the Philippines-based non-profit The Maritime

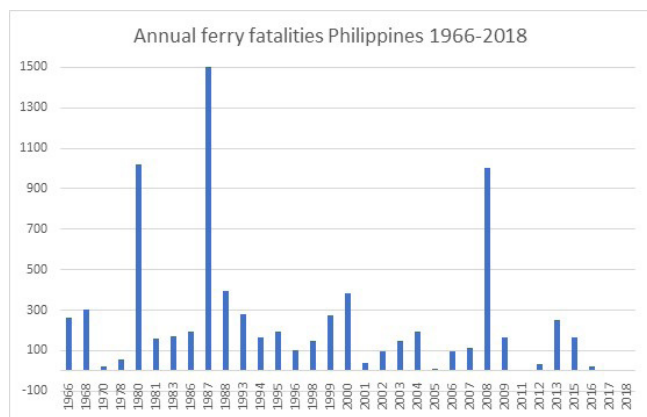


Figure 1: A graph demonstrating the general decline in ferry fatalities in the Philippines in recent years. Note: the 1987 total is off the chart due to the *Doña Paz* tragedy in December that year, in which the 93.1m ferry suffered a fire and sank, claiming more than 4,000 lives

League; and Neil Baird, chairman of Australian marine publisher Baird Maritime.

“There were 44 participants and we were happy with this attendance – it was just as we’d hoped for, but still hadn’t quite dared to expect,” Johan Roos tells *Ship & Boat International*. “All aspects of the ferry industry in the Philippines were represented, including ferry owners, builders, designers, masters and crew, classification societies, port authorities, union reps, regulators, tour operators and the media.

“All came from the Manila area – but their presence nearly always involved considerable time and trouble due to the typically heavy traffic.” Summing up the enthusiasm of the participants and the eagerness to share knowledge, he recalls: “In one case, this required a round trip of seven hours!”

### Government action

Roos continues: “At this stage, it’s too early to be conclusive about the main cause of Philippines fatalities. However, this initial round of interviews produced general agreement that the most important factors in the country’s improved safety record stem from stricter controls relating to weather conditions and passenger/cargo loading, together with various fleet modernisation initiatives.”

He identifies an alliance between government and industry stakeholders as “a paramount prerequisite for sustained safety improvements in any country,” adding: “Our initial findings suggest that this is a key factor in safety improvements in the Philippines. It became apparent that the capsizing and sinking of the ro-pax ferry *Princess of the Stars* in a typhoon in June 2008, with the loss of more than 800 lives, prompted a turning point.” Just as the April

2014 sinking of the ferry *Sewol* provoked an angry public backlash in South Korea, the *Princess of the Stars* tragedy – which was later attributed to a rash decision to leave port at the height of Typhoon Fengshen – spurred national outrage in the Philippines. “Both government and the industry acknowledged the need for drastic action, which was put in place within five years and launched the ensuing safety improvement,” he says.

Being cynical for a moment, is there a possibility that the noted decline in incidents may simply be a case of under-reporting – or, even worse, could casualty figures have been ‘massaged’ to produce a more favourable result? “We think the risk of under-reporting in the Philippines is small,” replies Roos. “The reporting climate is very open, although we are not confident that all fatalities are captured in cases of ‘smaller’ accidents, involving wooden boats.” From a boat design angle, these small ferries could stand to benefit greatly, with regards to seakeeping and stability, from the input of skilled naval architects.

### Phase two: Cebu

However, Roos continues, the general perception is that despite some peaks and troughs in the fatality statistics over the years, “the Philippines is now consistently moving in the right direction”. Part of the FerrySafe project’s challenge will be to see how this success can be replicated in other countries’ ferry sectors. Roos believes that this transferral of knowledge should not be limited by perceived cultural differences. “Cultural differences might be a factor, but affluence, levels of corruption and general transparency are most likely more important than cultural considerations,” he says.

While the industry is to be commended on pushing this issue, it should not shoulder the burden of responsibility for change by itself. “Government oversight on prohibiting worst practices – such as unseaworthiness, overloading and sailing despite typhoon forecasts – will be fundamental to the safety regime in developing countries,” says Roos. “The action taken in the Philippines is a major part of the process.” He also notes that the rise of social media over the past decade has provided the public with a powerful means of holding ferry owners and operators to account. “A new generation of ferry passengers has higher expectations of the operators and the services they provide,” he adds. “Under-performers will be noted.”

Now, the same four-man project team will reconvene in the Philippines in the week commencing 25 May, this time in the city of Cebu, further south in the island cluster, where it will conduct further interviews with relevant parties to gain “valuable, practical insights into the improved safety regime”, Roos says. The feedback gathered from both visits will then be collated and presented at Interferry’s 44th annual conference, to be hosted in London, UK in October this year, followed by the publishing of a report on the team’s findings. Interferry states: “Dissemination [of the report] to other developing nations will be primarily through the association’s involvement with the ongoing ASEAN Regional Forum on ferry safety and through its consultative status at IMO.”

Rolling out the lessons learned from the Philippines to other national sectors will require “additional external funding and cooperation”, Roos says. “The largest improvement potential is found in South East Asia and Africa, but – apart from the funding – we would need political support from the respective countries, as well as from IMO.” It is perhaps worth noting that the FerrySafe project team members calculate that they are contributing man-hours worth an estimated £30,000 (US\$38,800) to furthering this goal. It’s an ambitious and welcome project, and proof of the industry’s commitment to safety across the globe – but the more that governments proactively involve themselves in the process, the sooner we may be able to toast similar safety achievements in other countries. *SBI*