

# 600 feared drowned in launch capsizes

Strong current keeps rescuers at bay; 3 bodies recovered; 150 swim ashore



A woman fights her tears back as she waits on the river bank in Chandpur yesterday for her relatives, feared drowned in the Meghna. The triple-deck MV Nasrin-1 sank in the turbulent waters of the river Tuesday night.

PHOTO: S K ENAMUL HAQ

SHARIFUL ISLAM, Chandpur

About 600 people are feared drowned when an overcrowded launch capsized after being sucked into a whirlpool in the fierce-flowing Meghna river at Chandpur on Tuesday night.

The triple-decker MV Nasrin-1 was on its way to Lalmoohan in the offshore island of Bhola from Dhaka when it went down in the turbulent river in the confluence of the Meghna and the Dakatia at about 10:45pm, officials said.

About 150 people swam ashore or were rescued on Tuesday night and two bodies were retrieved from the disaster area. Another

body was recovered from Ilisha in Barisal, over 100 kilometers off the scene.

The operation to salvage the launch and passengers trapped inside could not be launched last night as converging currents in the rain-swollen rivers hobbled all attempts.

The launch set out at 6:45pm carrying about 750 passengers against the licensed capacity of 300, plus cargo.

Passengers swarmed the launch as the MV Coco, another scheduled on the route, cancelled its journey because of technical faults.

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## A survivor's account

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A 12-year-old boy miraculously survived the launch mishap near Chandpur on Tuesday by jumping in the river.

Reaz saved his life by jumping in the Meghna when MV Nasrin-1 was sinking.

"I saw the launch sinking, I

jumped into the river to save my life," he said.

"I got hold of a piece of wood, five others also grasped the wood and after a few minutes, people coming in a boat rescued me".

Local people think dead bodies of the sunken launch will float after 24 hours.

## Nothing goes right in riverways

RAFIQ HASAN

Overloading, inefficiency of captains, flawed design and lack of supervision by the government are the reasons for launch disaster frequency on inland waterways, said marine engineers and shipping officials yesterday.

The MV Nasrin-1 that sank in the Meghna river on Tuesday was overloaded with passengers and cargo. The triple-deck launch with a licensed capacity of 300 passengers loaded about 750 passengers and 300 sacks of rice, said sources.

Hardly any passenger vessels plying the inland waterways can withstand windy, rough weather, as they are built on faulty designs, said a high official of the shipping ministry requesting anonymity.

Over 2,000 big and medium-sized vessels are plying various routes covering more than 8,000 miles of waterways in Bangladesh.

Sources blamed the non-implementation of the government's safety measures on a long-standing feud among three groups involved in the sector: marine engineers, naval architects and

captains.

The government's efforts to strengthen surveys and supervision of the vessels failed because of the conflict among those people, said the sources in the shipping department.

A conflict between Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) and Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC) made the situation worse.

The government failed to shift

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## Two bodies formed to probe capsizes

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government yesterday formed two inquiry committees on two separate launch disasters Tuesday night at the confluence of mighty Meghna, Padma and Dakatia near Chandpur.

Both the committees have been asked to submit their reports within seven days.

The first inquiry committee is formed for the launch MV Nasreen 1, which sank with more than 600 passengers on board in the river

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## All went wrong from the start

MORSHED ALI KHAN

With the sudden breakdown of MV Coco's engine at the last moment before departure at the Sadarghat launch terminal at around 6:00pm on Tuesday, the disaster started to brew.

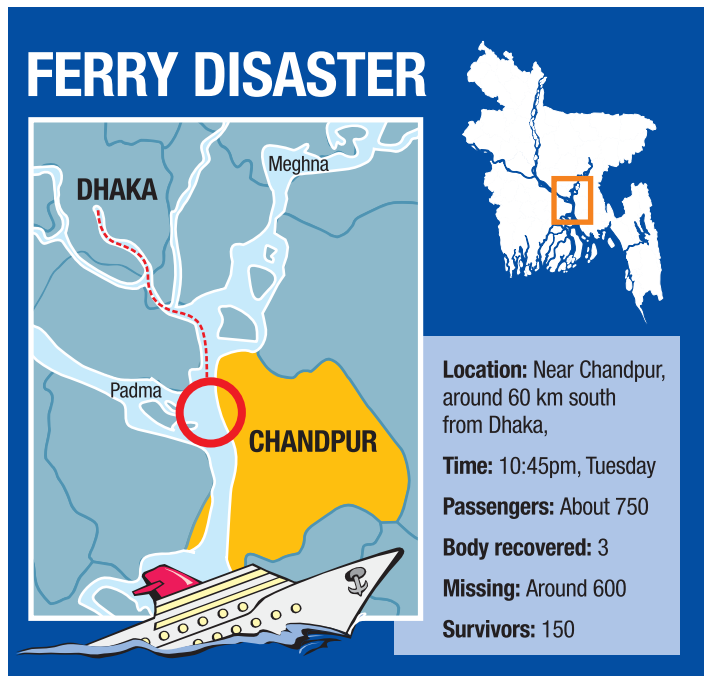
Several hundred passengers to Lalmoohan, most of whom were poor city dwellers going home, rushed to MV Nasrin-1, the only other option for them on the day departing at 6:30pm. Soon, the launch, having a capacity to carry 300 passengers, was filled up to the brim.

Nasrin-1 left Sadarghat launch

terminal with more than twice its capacity of passengers and merchandise, unchallenged by any of the dozen port officers, traffic inspectors and terminal inspectors. The reason these officials were not on duty at the Sadarghat launch terminal was "simple". "We were conducting an official clamp-down on illegal barges on the Buriganga river" was the reply of an official.

Launch owners, BIWTA and shipping department sources said a part of the blame for the ill-fated launch's overloading and consequent capsizing, in which about six

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STAR GRAPHICS



PHOTO: STAR

A diver climbs back to a rescue vessel, now anchored in the Meghna, as he fails to recover any body because of fierce converging currents in the river.



PHOTO: STAR

Relatives, left, wait on the river bank in Chandpur for rescued passengers; workers, middle, of the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society roam the river for dead bodies; and salvage vessel Rustam of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority floats in the water without carrying out any rescue operation yesterday. A triple-deck launch went down in the Meghna, being sucked into a whirlpool in the rain-swollen river, with about 750 passengers aboard, just before Tuesday midnight.

## No decision on gas export, but experts opt for limited sale

### PM tells Jatiya Sangsad

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia told the Jatiya Sangsad yesterday that the government is yet to decide on gas export although expert committees recommended limited sale.

Two national expert committees had suggested gas could be exported from the one-third portion retained by the international oil

companies (IOCs).

"If we export 500mmcf gas daily, an estimated total of 3.5tcf gas will be exported in 20 years. In such a proposition, we'll not require to buy compulsorily this much of gas from the IOCs in next 20 years," she said, quoting the recommendation.

If the export is allowed, Khaleda said, the pipeline that would be laid

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## 2,500 more bullets recovered in Bogra

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bogra

Police recovered 2,500 more bullets from Gogarpada village of Kahalu upazila in Bogra yesterday.

The bullets, abandoned in a bag on the bank of river Nagar in Gogarpada, were recovered at around 9:30am, said Officer-in-Charge Wahidur Rahman of Kahalu thana.

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## HC rule on govt's order for removal of bumper

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court Division yesterday issued a rule nisi on the government to show cause in a week why the order to remove extra bumpers from all vehicles by July 10 should not be declared illegal.

The decision to remove bumpers was taken following the tragic accident caused by the extra bumper in a car in which Dr. Mohammad Shahjahan Ali of the Orthopaedic Hospital died on July 1 on the Mirpur Road.

The rule came upon a writ filed

by one Kamruzzaman Chowdhury challenging the legitimacy of the government order. Counsel for the petitioner ABM Nurul Islam submitted that the government order was arbitrary. "It has no power to do this under the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) Rules and Motor Vehicles Act. In the BRTA rules there is no provision that permission will be needed to use extra bumpers in motorised vehicles for their protection and safety."

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