






FRIDAY
DECEMBER 22, 2017

THE PHILIPPINE STAR
news



THE PHILIPPINE STAR

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VOL. XXXII NO. 148 • FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22, 2017 • 8 SECTIONS, 68 PAGES P20 MM



Fastcraft capsizes off Quezon; 4 dead

By MICHELLE ZOLETA and JAIME LAUDE

A ferry with 251 people on board capsized in rough seas off Quezon yesterday, with four of the passengers reported to have died as of last night and 240 others rescued.

The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) has yet to confirm the number of casualties from the sinking of *M/V Mercraft 3* at around 10:30 a.m. But the bodies of two men and two

Vinta threatens Caraga; storm alerts up. See Page 7

women had been recovered, according to initial reports from the Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction Management Office (PDRRMO) headed by Bong Diaz and from Oliver Luces, chairman of the Calabarzon Regional Disaster Risk Reduction Management Council and regional director of the Office of Civil Defense.

Luces said the bodies were brought to the Claro M. Recto District Hospital for processing

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and verification by authorities.

Seven other passengers are missing.

Local authorities said the vessel was navigating toward the port of Polillo from Real, Quezon when huge waves hit and caused it to sink.

The PDRRMO said rescue operations were immediately conducted by elements of the PCG, Infanta and Polillo police as well as Municipal Disaster Risk Reduction Management Office and Southern Luzon Command.

Luces said a Philippine Air Force search and rescue helicopter was immediately dispatched to assist in the search and recovery operations but bad weather prevented it from flying over the capsized ferry.

The vessel left the port of Ungos in Real at 6:15 a.m. with 251 passengers listed on the official manifest.

PCG spokesman Captain Armand Balilo said they were awaiting updates from their field offices in Quezon and Southern Tagalog with regard to the incident but assured the public that rescued passengers were given immediate medical treatment.

Luces said the rescued passengers who suffered injuries were also rushed to Claro M. Recto Hospital in Infanta, while the others were taken to a multipurpose center of Barangay Dinahican.

The PCG said the vessel was not overloaded since it could carry up to 286 passengers.

Balilo said the vessel was allowed to sail as there were no storm warnings at or around Real or Polillo.

"It is still not sure if the maritime incident is related to

Storm Vinta because while the storm would not directly hit the area where the ship sank, there are other factors that we might have to consider such as the northeast monsoon and the eastern seaboard," Balilo said.

Vinta was expected to make landfall in Surigao del Sur last night or this morning.

Balilo said they will conduct an investigation and interview the surviving passengers and crew to determine the cause of the accident.

But Balilo said the priority is the completion of the search and rescue mission for the people on board the ill-fated ferry.

Aside from the PCG ships in the area, there were also Navy and privately owned vessels such as *M/V Mercraft 2*, sister ship of the capsized vessel, taking part in the search and rescue operation.

The government has advised Filipinos planning to return to their home provinces for Christmas to do so earlier than usual to avoid the storm that is expected to hit before the holidays.

The Philippines, an archipelago of more than 7,000 islands on the Pacific typhoon belt, is plagued by poor sea transport, with badly regulated boats and ships providing the backbone for the system prone to overcrowding and accidents.

The latest accident occurred 30 years to the day after another ferry, the *Dona Paz* of the defunct Sulpicio Lines, collided with an oil tanker, claiming more than 4,000 lives in the world's worst peacetime maritime disaster.

- With Evelyn Macairan, Ed Amoroso, AP/AFP