

# The Sinking of the MV Doña Paz – A Critique on Maritime Disaster Preparedness in the Philippines: an Analysis of the Event

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective.** To discuss the various factors contributory to the fatalities that resulted from the sinking of the MV *Doña Paz*.

**Methods.** Review of the pre-disaster, disaster and post-disaster events surrounding the sinking of the MV *Doña Paz*, as well as the subsequent response by the government and responsible agencies to the disaster.

**Results.** The Sinking of the MV *Doña Paz*, along with the loss of more than 4,000 precious lives, is but a footnote in the long litany of misfortunes plaguing the Philippine maritime industry. A closer look into the events and circumstances leading to this tragedy demonstrates a confluence of equipment and system inadequacy on one hand and human error and lack of preparedness on the other.

**Conclusion.** Multiple factors account for the occurrence of this tragedy, along with other maritime disaster incidents dotting the long maritime history of the Philippines. A cursory analysis of these factors may lead to recommendations that can prevent similar occurrences in the future and mitigate damage to property and loss of life. The policy implications of these findings are discussed in a subsequent paper.

**Key Words:** maritime industry, Philippines, disaster preparedness

## Introduction

The Philippines is a maritime country by force of geography owing to its archipelagic layout. Hundreds of ferries carry many thousands of working people and rural poor between the more than 7,000 islands the country

comprises. Given the vulnerability to harsh environmental conditions and our reliance on boats and ships for inter-island travel, Filipinos are somewhat resigned to the numerous maritime accidents dotting the history of the Philippine domestic shipping industry and their toll on human life (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Maritime disasters\* in the Philippines (1980-2003)

1980	M/V DON JUAN	180 DEAD/115 MISSING
1981	M/V SAN JUAN	52 DEAD
1986	M/V DOÑA JOSEFINA	150 DEAD
1987	M/V DOÑA PAZ	> 4000 DEAD
1988	M/V MARILYN	500 DEAD
1994	M/V CEBU CITY	66 DEAD/ 76 MISSING
1995	M/V VIVA ANTIPOLLO VII	62 DEAD
1995	M/V KIMELODY CRISTY	17 DEAD/ 20 MISSING
1996	M/L GRETCHEN I	51 DEAD
1996	M/V DAVID JR.	7 MISSING
1996	M/B NICKADEL	4 MISSING
1996	M/V PENAFRANCIA	2 THROWN OVERBOARD
1997	M/B FISH HUNTER	3 DEAD
1997	F/B ANNIE PAULINE	4 MISSING
1997	M/V KALIBO STAR	17 DEAD/ 13 MISSING
1998	M/V PRINCESS OF THE ORIENT	70 DEAD/ 80 MISSING
1999	M/V ASIA SOUTH KOREA	58 DEAD
2001	M/L ANNAHADA	124 DEAD/ 14 MISSING
2002	M/V MARIA CARMELA	39 DEAD / 6 MISSING
2002	M/V NILODE- A	19 DEAD
2003	M/V SAN NICHOLAS	43 DEAD/ 21 MISSING

\*Maritime disasters refer to events occurring at sea that result to "a mismatch of casualties seeking medical care and the availability of such care." (Eischen J. *Maritime disasters*. In: Hogan DE, Burstein JL, eds. *Disaster medicine*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins; 2007. pp. 332-338.)

On the morning of December 21, 1987, the Filipino people were given a rude awakening when the news broke that the lives of more than 4,000 people hoping to spend Christmas in Manila were lost forever in a sea of fire off the coast of a remote province in Mindoro. The ensuing response from concerned agencies focused on finger pointing, putting the blame on organizations concerned with safety and enforcing regulations governing the Philippine maritime industry. Several bodies, including both Houses of

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Congress displayed extraordinary eagerness to conduct hearings on the sensational issue in front of national media. Proposals to improve maritime safety by enforcing the implementation of strict standards were bannered by legislators and concerned organizations immediately after the incident.

The reality is that months after the incident interest died down, with families of the victims left without or with only minimal compensation, with blame being put on agency officials not capable of defending themselves. Questions on the effectiveness of the proposed measures were quickly answered when another passenger ship, the MV *Marilyn* belonging to the same shipping company (Sulpicio Lines), also sank, killing hundreds of innocent people a year later.

This first of two papers will dissect and analyze the circumstances leading to, during, and immediately following, the worst peacetime maritime disaster in modern history, in the process reconstructing the events as accurately as possible. A comprehensive understanding of the incident, the factors contributing to the tragedy, the immediate response to the tragedy and the acute medical care provided to the victims will lead to recommendations for improving our preparedness to deal with and prevent similar catastrophes in the future.

### Methods

A comprehensive search and review of all available records on the sinking was performed. Relevant published materials regarding the events were gathered including newspaper articles from the most widely distributed daily newspapers that extensively covered the incident. A formal request was made to the Philippine Daily Inquirer, and the authors were given access to several archived articles on the incident.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> Official reports from agencies concerned with the accident were secured and reviewed when available. A formal request from the MARINA office allowed the authors to secure a copy of the report, "MARINA Report on the Doña Paz Tragedy".<sup>5</sup> Proceedings from congressional hearings were secured through the Senate Secretariat's Office Websites of government agencies concerned with the maritime industry were accessed and searched for relevant information.<sup>6</sup>

A direct interview with a survivor and another victim's relative were conducted. Documentaries produced by National Geographic<sup>7</sup> and GMA News Network<sup>8</sup> were also reviewed.

A thorough review and cross referencing of the above sources of information were conducted to reconstruct the circumstances surrounding the incident.

### Results and Discussion

**Pre-disaster Events.** The MV *Doña Paz* was a steel-hulled liner built in 1963 weighing 2,215 tons and was owned by Sulpicio Lines, one of seven major companies

controlling the majority of the shipping industry in the Philippines. It had a declared capacity of 1,518 passengers and was manned by a crew of 60.<sup>1</sup> It was acquired by Sulpicio Lines in 1975.<sup>8</sup>

The steel-hulled, 629-ton MT *Vector*, the other ship involved in the accident, carried a crew of 13. At the time of the incident, the *Vector* was on lease to Caltex Philippines, tasked with transporting its cargo of 9,000 barrels of gasoline, kerosene and crude oil from Bataan to Masbate.<sup>5,8</sup>

Most of the vessels plying the major Filipino domestic shipping routes are secondhand cargo and passenger ships bought cheap from Japanese shipyards, which are then reconditioned in local shipyards, given new names and advertised as luxury passenger liners. All the seven major liners (Sulpicio Lines, Sweet Lines, Aboitiz Shipping Corp, Hijos de Escano Inc., Negros Navigation, Carlos Gothong Lines, and William Lines Inc.) maintain ships with an average age of 22 years, with 20% of these more than 30 years old. According to shipping companies, procurement of new ships coupled with high maintenance costs and low revenues will render business non-viable.<sup>1</sup>

In the Philippines, water transportation is still the best mode of cargo carriage and transport between its more than 7,000 islands. Passengers traveling both for business and pleasure to various locations within the archipelago still favor water travel due to lower fares and unlimited baggage allowances, especially when compared with air travel.

The travel conditions along the routes being plied by these ships can best be described as unpredictable, at worst hazardous. In many parts of the country, typhoons and hurricanes regularly batter shipping lanes. The maritime industry often has to rely on weather advisories from government agencies with aging and obsolete forecasting equipment, the batting average of which can be described as inconsistent at best. This is compounded by inadequate dissemination of available accurate weather forecasts. Other aids to navigation appear to be equally inadequate. Of the 308 lighthouses lining the 36,289 km coastline, less than half are operational. Only 42 of the 120 charted buoys in Philippine waters are in position. Government navigational charts have not been updated since 1980 to reflect present sea conditions, such as vessel wreckage and non-functional lighthouses. The numerous vessels plying these routes have to rely on many occasions on the crewmen's experience and instinct, referred to as "dead reckoning". The *Doña Paz* and the *Vector* set out on their respective voyages armed only with these navigational tools, as had always been the case in the numerous trips they had taken.<sup>5</sup>

Several government agencies and institutions oversee the Philippine maritime industry and each has its own set of operating procedures. For every ship and every sailing, clearances have to be obtained from at least eight agencies, including the Philippine Ports Authority (PPA), Bureau of Customs (BoC), Bureau of Posts (BoP) and Bureau of Plant

Industry (BPI). Inspection by the National Quarantine Office is aimed at ensuring sanitary conditions inside passenger ships.<sup>6</sup>

The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) is tasked to inspect the ships yearly to ensure their safety. Ships found seaworthy are issued certificates of inspection, while those found unseaworthy are taken to the docks for repairs. The *Doña Paz*, at the time of her last voyage, was said to have all the necessary inspection papers from all these agencies. The *Vector*, on its last PCG inspection, was found to have a steering defect and some other deficiencies. Based on available documents, its radio license had expired nearly 18 months earlier. It sailed without a certificate of inspection and the papers it submitted to the Coast Guard were found to be fake.<sup>5,8</sup>

Seamen in the Philippines are licensed by the Professional Regulation Commission, as are all crewmen plying Philippine waters and manning international vessels. The Philippines in fact controls nearly 20 percent of the officer and rated positions in the world's fleet with more than 180,000 seafarers. It is said that among seafarers worldwide, Filipinos have the most training, assessment and certification. It is a valid premise that the crewmen of both ships were part of this trained group.<sup>2</sup>

The Philippine Rescue Coordinating Center (PRCC), as mandated internationally, is the lead agency when maritime disasters occur. Although the National Disaster Coordinating Council is responsible for disaster management during natural or manmade calamities, the PRCC is tapped for its technical competence in handling aeronautical and maritime disasters. It has at its disposal the resources of the Philippine Air Force for its Search and Rescue (SAR) operations. This is where the Air Force plays a vital role, along with the Navy through the Coast Guard. Aside from these resources, the PRCC can tap planes and choppers of the US Air Force stationed in the country tasked to assist in civil emergencies when they occur.<sup>9</sup>

Of the numerous government agencies concerned with making policies and overseeing the Philippine maritime industry, none play a more direct and important role than the PCG. Although some agencies overlap its functions, it is concerned with maritime security, maritime safety, maritime environmental protection and maritime search and rescue. Aside from doing its part in enforcing rules and regulations to ensure the seaworthiness of vessels carrying passengers and cargo, it has the enormous responsibility of patrolling Philippine sea waters. This entails monitoring 500,000 square miles of territorial waters and a coastline twice that of the United States. As is the case with other government agencies severely hampered by limited resources, the PCG has very meager equipment given the task at hand. The PCG only has two search and rescue cutters and 23 World War II-vintage boats for patrolling a very large area. Not only does it have to contend with vessels with questionable seaworthiness, it

is also expected to constantly intercept and prevent pirates, terrorists and rebels from taking advantage of the country's porous coastlines to engage in a multitude of nefarious activities.<sup>6</sup>

Such were the conditions of the Philippine Maritime Industry when both the *Doña Paz* and the *Vector* set out from their respective points of origin. Though the history of the water travel in the Philippines has always been marked by mishaps and accidents, both manmade and natural, never had a tragedy of this magnitude and human toll ever occurred in the history of civilian shipping.

**Disaster Events.** On December 20, 1987, people from Samar and Leyte and various areas from the southern Philippines were joining the mad rush to board the *Doña Paz* on its voyage to Manila, hoping to join their families, others bringing their families to the big city, in time for the Christmas holidays. It was set to sail from Tacloban City in Samar to Manila. The 675 people who boarded the *Doña Paz* in Tacloban were all listed in its passenger manifest. Another 908 boarded the liner when it stopped in Catbalogan to pick up more passengers. The declared number of passengers was placed at 1,583, along with a crew of 58. The declared capacity of the *Doña Paz* was only 1,518 passengers and 60 crew members; based on the listed passengers alone the ship was already loaded beyond its capacity and it should not have been allowed to proceed by the Coast Guard and/or the shipping line and its crew. Accounts from survivors, however, described a ship packed to the railings, four deep in the bunks with no place to move in the common areas. Others claim that the ship was visibly listing to one side, even before it left its moorings in Tacloban; a visual testament to its state of overload.<sup>8</sup> At the points of boarding, hundreds more came aboard as the ship was leaving port. It was estimated by those on board that the *Doña Paz* left port with around 3,000 to 4,000 passengers. Accounts from those with experience with other liners confirm that in the Philippines, discrepancies between the manifest and actual passenger load easily run up to thousands.

The difference will be accounted for by several factors. Children are usually not listed in the manifest. On this particular trip, hundreds of children, excited to go to Manila, were brought along by their parents. It is an acknowledged practice that tickets to the ships are sold by scalpers, and this trip was no different, with many trying to get valuable slots for the *Doña Paz*.<sup>3</sup>

The *Vector*, with its crew of 13, set out to sea from Batanes, carrying 9,000 gallons of petroleum products including gasoline, kerosene and oil. The most senior navigator on deck serving as captain was a seafarer with a license of 2nd mate. The crew, as is customary during long holidays in the Philippines, was already in a festive mood, drinking and merrymaking during the trip.

Based on available accounts of the incident, there were no reported weather disturbances at the time the *Vector* and

the *Doña Paz* crossed paths at Tablas Strait, 40kms from Oriental Mindoro and about 175kms from Manila. Much of what happened can be reconstructed from accounts of the survivors and those within the vicinity of the incident. Those who were awake at the time of the incident heard an explosion that jarred the *Doña Paz*. One survivor claimed to have just talked to the captain and the chief mates of the *Doña Paz* who were drinking liquor at a party on the bridge a few minutes before the explosion. Upon going up the deck, survivors saw the ocean turn into a sea of flames. Many of those who survived can only recall jumping into the water, leaving behind people wailing and screaming in pain. Children's cries echoed in the night. A man who was with his family was awakened by the loud explosion while sleeping in one of the bunks of the *Doña Paz*. He went to the cabinet containing the life vests only to find them locked. He jumped into the burning waters to escape the flames engulfing the *Doña Paz*, never knowing what happened to his wife and two daughters who accompanied him on the trip to Manila. One survivor remembers seeing people burning afloat on the open seas, with many others swimming and shouting the names of relatives and crying out for help.<sup>4</sup>

Evidence gathered by subsequent inquiries concluded that the *Vector* rammed the port side of the *Doña Paz*, immediately disabling the engine and setting the two ships on fire. Both ships sank in about 545 meters of shark-infested waters within a matter of minutes. The crew of the ship sailing within a few miles of the collision heard a loud explosion and a ball of fire towering several hundred meters was seen. It will never be ascertained what transpired on the bridge of the *Doña Paz* and the *Vector* right before the incident. It is likewise acknowledged that no distress call was sent from the radios of either vessel. No one received the SOS call, if ever there was one. The answer went down along with all 58 crewmen of the *Doña Paz*, and 11 of the 13 seafarers on board the *Vector*. The two survivors from the *Vector* never had an inkling of the imminent collision.<sup>5</sup>

The MV *Don Claudio*, a cargo ship plying a route bringing it close to the scene of the collision, witnessed the explosion and the ball of fire lighting up the sky. They reached the scene within a few hours of the collision but never saw either of the two ships. Debris was all around the ocean and they searched for survivors. They were able to rescue 26 people, 24 of them were passengers of the *Doña Paz* and two were from the *Vector*. This act of heroism was the only bright spot in this tragedy, for subsequent search and rescue operations would only confirm the magnitude of the tragedy, with the recovery of hundreds of bodies and leaving behind thousands more trapped in the depths of Tablas Strait.<sup>5</sup>

**Post-disaster Events.** News of the collision reached the Philippine Rescue Coordinating Council (PRCC), the lead government agency tasked to handle maritime emergencies

such as this, a full eight hours after the collision. Details from secondhand information were allegedly insufficient and thus, a search and rescue operation was not initiated at this point. After another eight hours, information was deemed adequate and the PCG, Philippine Air Force and US Air Force were mobilized. US choppers and a reconnaissance plane that arrived first at the scene initially failed to locate the site. They later noted an area where debris was floating all around, with no survivors in sight. All vessels and aircraft arrived at the point of the collision at least 16 hours later, long after both ships had sunk.

The *Don Claudio*, despite having practically nonexistent medical supplies, was able to safely bring all of the 26 survivors they rescued from the site to Manila North Harbor, 175 kilometers from the area of the collision even before an organized, credible search and rescue operation was mounted. Waiting at the harbor were a few ambulances sent by those who received calls from the *Don Claudio*. The survivors who were able to walk and had no gross signs of injury made their own arrangements for transportation. Some were picked up by relatives, others took taxis while those having nowhere to go stayed for a long period of time waiting for the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) to assist them.<sup>4</sup>

The survivors who had gross signs of injuries were brought individually to various hospitals in Manila and were treated for burn injuries. Some were brought to Metropolitan Hospital, others to San Juan de Dios Hospital and Jose Reyes Memorial Medical Center. No listing of the survivors who required medical treatment could be obtained from government agencies involved in the management of this accident.<sup>4</sup>

The subsequent government response to this tragedy involved mainly retrieval operations for the many corpses left at sea. Hundreds of bodies washed ashore on the coastlines of Oriental Mindoro, leaving the local villagers with the grim task of spraying them with sanitizers and covering them up with makeshift structures to minimize the smell. Some were forced to bury the dead without having them identified to prevent them from rotting near houses lining the shore. Outbreaks of diarrhea and respiratory illness were noted in these villages. The Coast Guard enlisted the help of banca (boat) owners, shipping companies and private boat operators to help them in the retrieval operations. A little over 500 bodies were subsequently recovered and many were left unidentified. The true number of casualties to this day remains unknown as thousands remain entombed in the *Doña Paz* and its environs.

Initial public reaction to the incident was one of extreme outrage towards Sulpicio Lines. Relatives of the casualties lined up outside the offices of Sulpicio Lines crying for the heads of officials. Sulpicio Lines immediately blamed Caltex Philippines for contracting the *Vector* to carry highly



dangerous cargo on a grossly inadequate and unseaworthy vessel.

The various branches of the government initiated separate inquiries into the accident and independently released their findings. The Board of Marine Inquiry, Senate Committee on National Defense, Coast Guard and Congress all conducted investigations. A congressional probe committee declared that both the *Doña Paz* and the *Vector* should be blamed for the collision. After conducting 13 public hearings and listening to the testimony of 55 expert witnesses, the committee concluded that the crewmen manning both ships were not qualified to do so. They also cited the government's overall apathy toward the local maritime industry as the real culprit behind the collision. The Marine Board of Inquiry report put the blame squarely on the *Vector*. Based on their reconstruction of events, the *Vector* sailed with hazardous cargo without the necessary permits, was unseaworthy, and was manned by incompetent and unqualified crewmen. The Senate inquiry blamed both ships and the government for its lack of support to the shipping industry.<sup>3,5,6</sup>

Sulpicio Lines was mandated by the government to compensate the families of the victims amounting to 30,000 pesos per family. A processing center was set up in Manila by the government, manned by personnel of Sulpicio Lines and government workers. Though Sulpicio Lines stuck to their claim that passengers were limited to the 1,583 listed in the manifest, representatives of the liner declared that their company is willing to process the claim of whoever can produce documents to prove their family went down with the *Doña Paz*. In fact, the company processed claims of more than 3,000 families. Some of these claims however turned out to be fraudulent. Some families on the other hand were too poor to have any documents on hand. The relatives of the victims resorted to legal remedies, including filing a class action suit. They were, however, unable to raise the six million pesos required as a filing fee. The survivors were sent home without any compensation or even post-event counseling. Those who suffered injuries and received treatment in hospitals were assisted by the company in settling their medical expenses.<sup>10</sup> Families filed cases individually hoping to get just compensation from Sulpicio lines. Those who accepted the 30,000 were required to sign a waiver. Although attempts at providing enforcement through punitive action to accompany standing maritime safety regulations have been repeatedly exerted, to this day, no one has been held liable for the maritime disasters that followed after the *Doña Paz*.<sup>11</sup>

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The sinking of the Titanic pales in comparison to the tragedy that is the MV *Doña Paz*, and a lot of factors can account for the occurrence of such a tragedy, along with

other maritime disaster incidents dotting the long maritime history of the Philippines.

The tragedy of the *Doña Paz* sinking may have resulted from ships of questionable seaworthiness being manned by less-than-qualified mariners. These factors were compounded by an archaic communication system that contributed to the delay in response. This delay, along with the perennial problem of overloading of passengers and inadequate medical response, contributed immensely to the unprecedented loss of lives.

Strict enforcement of existing laws and formulation of new ones may prevent future maritime accidents and decrease morbidity and mortality when such events occur. The shipping industry must exert an effort to upgrade vessels and equipment, and improve compliance with existing regulations. The government must take a proactive stance and provide support to the industry while exerting its power to ensure that laws on maritime safety are strictly followed.

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