

Monday October 15, 2007

Ferry licence ?expired?

MERSING: The ferry that caught fire while heading for Pulau Tioman on Saturday, leading to the death of four passengers, did not have a valid ship licence and passenger certificate.

A Marine Department spokesman said the licence for the *Seagull Express* had expired on March 16 last year, while its passenger certificate had an expiry date of March 18, 2005.

However, *Seagull Express* and Accommodation Sdn Bhd ? the operator of the ferry ? has denied that the ferry did not have a valid ship licence.



The licence, which has to be renewed annually, is issued by the department to certify that the ferry is seaworthy.

?We will check to ensure a ship has all the necessary safety equipment and life-saving appliances before renewing the licence,? the spokesman said.

He said the licence only allowed the vessel to leave the jetty with a maximum of 12 passengers.

To transport more people, its owners must apply for a passenger certificate. The ill-fated ferry's certificate, which has since expired, allowed it to carry up to 120 passengers and three crew members, he said.

The ferry had violated Section 484 of the Merchant Shipping Ordinance for sailing without a ship licence, and Section 218 of the same ordinance for not having a passenger certificate.



Fire horror: The Seagull Express on fire while on the way to Pulau Tioman. This picture was taken by a Star reader who was on a passing passenger ferry.

A ferry builders' certificate showed that the vessel was built in 1991.



The Seagull Express on one of its earlier trips.

The captain registered to pilot the ferry was one Roslan Mohamad, but it is learnt that he was not on board when the incident occurred.

Met at the Seagull office, the company owner's son Law Ah Heng, who helps out in the business, said they could not alert the Marine Department about the change of captains as it was closed for Hari Raya.

He said the fire started in the ferry's engine room due to a short-circuit.

"We service the ferry every day. Every time we want to take it out to sea, we will check to make sure everything is okay," he said.

Law also denied that the ferry did not have a valid ship licence.

Unlike motorists, who can drive any car as long as they have a valid driving licence, a ship captain is not allowed to pilot another vessel he is not registered to. If another captain is to pilot a vessel that is not registered under his name, he would have to obtain the approval of the Marine Department before going out to sea.

On Saturday, four passengers of the ferry drowned while 99 others, including three crew members, were plucked out from the sea after the vessel caught fire while on its way to Pulau Tioman. Three other passengers are still missing.

All 106 had jumped overboard when the fire onboard spread.

Police have identified the dead as Hoo Lee Lan, 67, from Kuala Lumpur, and Hong See Tiew, 53, and Teh Siew Lian, 52, both from Klang, and Tee Moi @ Haw Lee Moi, 68, from Batu Pahat.

Rompin OCPD Deputy Supt Abdullah Sani Salat said the ferry was about seven nautical miles from Pulau Tioman, near Rompin, Pahang, when the fire started in the engine room at 12.30pm.

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