

Madagascar shipwreck death toll rises to 85

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The wreck of the boat 'Francia', that sank off the coast on Monday, is pulled to the beach in northeastern Madagascar [Madagascar Ministry of National Defence via Reuters]

Antananarivo, December 23 (RHC)-- The death toll from a shipwreck off the coast of Madagascar this week has risen to 85, maritime officials have said. Maritime authorities said 138 people were on the 12-foot-long (3.6-metre) boat carrying cargo which sank on Monday, adding that only 50 had been rescued.

The wooden vessel, a cargo boat not authorised to carry passengers, had set off from the village of Antseraka for Soanierana-Ivongo, about 100 kilometres (60 miles) to the south. Initial investigations

suggested the vessel's engine had a "technical problem", according to Adrien Fabrice Ratsimbazafy of the River and Maritime Port Agency (APMF).

Jocelyne Kalou, who manages the Le Fumet hotel at Soanierana-Ivongo, told AFP news agency on Wednesday that the local graveyard was "too small to accommodate all the bodies. They are being sent to villages in the surrounding area."

Local mayor Alban Menavolo said he had helped to take 39 bodies by truck to the village, saying most of them were locals and he had known some of them. "I am very tired – I am having to shoulder the grief of the entire community. This kind of tragedy is very rare," he said.

Within hours of the disaster, a police helicopter that had set off from the capital Antananarivo with Police Minister Serge Gelle on board to help with search and rescue crashed at sea.

Gelle and an officer were thrown out of the craft and survived by swimming for nearly 12 hours to reach land. "Since I couldn't fight the waves, I knew I wouldn't make it to dry land. Yet I was very close. I arrived within 500 meters, but the waves sent me back because I was getting tired," Gellé said in a video posted by the gendarmerie.

"I thank heaven that there was a fisherman. But the fisherman's canoe was too small. So he had to come back for a bigger canoe. So I stayed two more hours in the sea," Gellé said from a hospital in the Madagascan capital.

They were found separately by residents on the beach at Mahambo, about 75 kilometres (75 miles) from the port city of Toamasina.

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