

ASIA'S TITANIC

THE WORST PASSENGER-CARRYING DISASTER OF THE 20th CENTURY IS NOT WELL-REMEMBERED TODAY. THE DISASTROUS COLLISION UNDERSCORED THE UNSAFE OPERATION OF THE PHILIPPINE FERRY SYSTEM
BY HECTOR ABAD

The thousands of islands that make up the Philippines are serviced by a bewildering variety of vessels that can be classified as ferries. These range from massive custom-built ships down to craft that are little more than rowboats.

With this proliferation of vessels has come lax standards, corruption, and downright danger on a massive scale. This story recounts one of the worst ship disasters in modern history — and a disaster that did not have to happen.

During 1963, work was completed by

Onomichi Zosen of Hiroshima, Japan, on a new ship. The Japanese shipbuilding industry had enjoyed a remarkable comeback after its complete destruction by American forces during World War Two and this company was built out of the atomic rubble of the first city to be destroyed by an atomic bomb. The new vessel was the *Himeyuri Maru* and she was built to transport up to 608 passengers through Japanese waters.

Himeyuri Maru led an unremarkable life as she plodded around Japan hauling passengers between various destinations. During October 1975, she was sold to an operator in the Philippines. The island nation had an almost voracious appetite for ferries and the new owner was Sulpicio Lines, an established company that had a fleet of passenger ferries. Under her new



Dona Paz at Tacoloban shortly before her sinking. Note the very large amount of rust on the hull and the overall poor condition of the ship.