

Sinking of sampan resulting in fatality at Tai Long Wan on 29 April 2004

1. The Incident

- 1.1 On 29 April 2004 at about 1330, an open sampan fitted with outboard engine was reported to have sunk near the coast of Tai Long Wan in Sai Kung. Three persons of a family, an aged couple at 75 and 71 and their son at 48, fell into the sea.
- 1.2 They managed to swim to the nearby coast but the mother was washed out to sea by a large wave and subsequently lost from sight. The father and son clung on to the rocks and stayed there for 6 hours. At about 1900 their relatives came to search for them on another sampan and rescued the two survivors.
- 1.3 The missing case was reported to the police. Shortly afterwards a search was carried out by various government launches and helicopter but to no avail. On the following day the body of a female person was found in the area. It was later identified as the deceased who had been washed out by wave.

2. Findings

- 2.1 The weather on the day of incident was fine with small wavelets in the area. However, the location where the family went fishing is an exposed area. Depth of water in the area is about 16 metres. The area opens to sea and there is no island to the east that could provide shelter from wind and waves. Furthermore, the areas to the east are also major shipping lanes for large container vessels visiting the port of Yantian. The wakes of these large container vessels, when synchronized with swells from the ocean, could generate large waves which occasionally would propagate and wash the shoreline in the vicinity of the area of the incident.
- 2.2 The sampan is a small open sampan. It is provided with built-in tanks integral to the hull for over half of the vessel's length at forward and amidships. These tanks can be used as holding tanks and, if secured by weather-tight lids, can also serve as buoyancy tanks. However, during this incident, the tanks were only covered by loosely fitted plastic lids that could be washed away by waves easily. Furthermore, the bottom plugs of two of these tanks were removed to bilge the tanks for the stowage of fish catches. This would further reduce the buoyancy of

the sampan and make it more susceptible to flooding and foundering.

3. The Lessons

- 3.1 The root cause of this fatal accident is identified to be the under-estimation of potential risks associated with operating small open vessel in exposed area. The sampan was operating with the covers of its buoyancy tanks not properly secured. Also two of these tanks were bilged for the stowage of fish catches. When the sampan encountered unexpected large waves, the tank covers were washed away and the inner hull together with the tanks were instantly flooded with seawaters. The reserved buoyancy was quickly lost which has lead to the sinking of the sampan.
- 3.2 The persons on board the sampan appeared unprepared for such emergency. Despite the fact that the deceased was unable to swim, she had not donned a lifejacket during the fishing activity on board. Had she donned a lifejacket, her chance of survival should have been much greater.
- 3.3 It is believed that the favorable weather condition on the day of incident might have given a deceptive sense of safety to the family in operating their sampan in exposed area. Also, the fact that the couple was experienced fishermen might have also induced complacency, leading to under-estimation of potential risks and lack of preparedness for emergencies.



The sunken sampan