Bihar Boat Tragedy

Why in news?

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- With four more bodies recovered, **the death toll in Saturday evening's boat tragedy in Bihar rose to 24.** The boat carrying over 60 people capsized in the Ganga while coming to the NIT ghat in Patna from Sandalpur area.
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Is this an administrative failure?

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- The boat disaster is another reminder that safety in **public transport remains a low priority for governments.** Mishaps in the inland waterways and lakes take a terrible toll of lives regularly, with no effective administrative response.
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- In the Ganga Diara tragedy near Patna, a large number of people had apparently crammed themselves into a small vessel for a free ride after witnessing a kite festival.
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- The boat involved appears not to have used its engine at the time of the accident, but the absence of safety training for operators is painfully evident.
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- The accident has exposed glaring holes in the system in place for water transport in the area: of the 50 private boats that ply on this section of the Ganga every day, over **30 are not registered and none carries life-jackets or safety tubes.**
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- There is a rule in place that boats shouldn't ply after sunset. But this is often flouted with hardly any government officials present here during normal days.
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- Besides, officials said, **NDRF teams were not called in as standby for the**

festival, which is being held annually for the last three years, and has been attracting thousands.
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- The capsized boat was pulled out from 15-ft-deep water by the NDRF on Sunday — its front portion was completely damaged. This was obviously the result of serious neglect of safety norms for which accountability must be fixed.
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What needs to be done?

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- It is essential that **a judicial commission be constituted** to inquire into the incident, to determine whether the laws on transport using inland waterways are being implemented and to issue directions for the future.
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- The Centre should respond to the shameful national record on boat safety by firmly implementing existing laws and introducing new measures along with the States.
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- Just last year it expanded the National Waterways programme and notified several stretches of rivers and canals for a new deal for inland water transport.
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- Just as in the case of motor vehicles, **registration of inland vessels** other than small personal non-powered craft must be made mandatory.
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- This will help enforce construction standards, subsidy for transport boats, passenger insurance and accident compensation.
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Concluding remarks:

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- In the latest tragedy, the problem also appears to have been **inadequate supply,** which forced people to pack themselves into the available boats. If this is true, the Bihar government must own full responsibility and prevent a recurrence.
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- This incident must stir the conscience of governments whose duty it is to provide safe and adequate public transport, and one at which it failed badly.
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