

Eleven dead, 29 missing as cruise ship runs aground in Italy

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With the discovery early Tuesday of five more bodies, eleven passengers are confirmed dead, 60 injured and an estimated 29 still missing after a massive cruise ship ran aground with 4,229 people on board of the coast of Italy Friday evening. Rough seas interrupted rescue operations early Monday as the ship shifted deeper into the water, but operations have since resumed.

The liner, Costa Concordia, the 29th largest in the world, is owned and operated by Costa Cruises, a subsidiary of Carnival Cruise Lines. Designed to carry 3,700 passengers and 1,100 crew, the ship was close to full capacity when the disaster occurred.

Initially, Costa Cruises President Gianni Onorato made a statement that the ship was on its “regularly scheduled itinerary” from Civitavecchia (the port for Rome) to Savona, Italy when it struck “a submerged rock.” Onorato asserted that Captain Francesco Schettino “immediately understood the severity of the situation” and “performed a maneuver intended to protect both guests and crew.”

Later on Sunday afternoon, the company issued a statement indicating there “may have been significant human error on the part of the ship's master.” A report on Monday's ABC New's “Good Morning America” said that the “captain made an unauthorized, unapproved deviation from the course,” resulting in the 114,500 metric ton vessel traversing through waters only 100 feet deep. The ship has a draft (dimension below waterline) of 27 feet.

At 9:45 the ship struck a rock, tearing a 160-foot gash in the left side of the hull, causing water to rush in. The captain changed course inside of Isola Giglio, a small island off the coast of Tuscany, toward the port of Giglio, apparently planning to evacuate the ship, when it ran aground.

Both the captain and first officer have been detained by Italian authorities after questioning, the captain being charged with manslaughter and abandoning his ship over three hours before passengers were completely evacuated.

The captain has denied any wrongdoing, insisting that the ship hit rocks that were not on his navigational charts and that he and his crew members were the last ones to abandon ship.

The ship's guest services manager Katia Keyvanian has denounced charges against the captain as “nonsense and lies”, recounting that the captain remained on the sinking ship until the last.

According to the company, the manifest consisted of 3,206 passengers and around 1,000 crew members. The passengers included Italians, Germans, French, Spanish and Americans, plus some 20 other nationalities in smaller numbers.

The dead include a Spanish man, an Italian, two French passengers, a Peruvian crew member and an unidentified older male.

Among the missing is a retired couple from Minnesota, Jerry and Barbara Heil, who decided to take a cruise after seeing their children through college.

Currently the ship is resting on its side on a shelf 120 feet below the surface and is threatening to slip into deeper water. Three teams of 16 rescue divers were working on the submerged side Monday to locate missing passengers.

The Italian government, meanwhile, is reportedly preparing to declare a state of emergency over the environmental disaster provoked by the wreck of the Costa Concordia, which is leaking up to half a million gallons of heavy oil into waters that have served as a dolphin sanctuary.

Passengers described the evacuation scene as chaotic

and panicked. The Italian media has referred to the disaster as the Italian Titanic.

After departing from the port of Civitavecchia some four hours earlier in the afternoon, a muster drill (an exercise usually carried out just after a ship's departure to familiarize passengers with evacuation procedures, life vests and designated lifeboat locations) had not been conducted, so not only passengers, but also apparently crew members, did not know what to do.

A passenger from Sicily, Alessandra Grasso, told the press, "No crew member was trained for an evacuation."

Giancarlo Sammatrice, from Vittoria, Sicily, said, "there were not enough lifeboats. The pilots were not sailors but waiters who had no idea how to maneuver and kept on having us turning in circles."

According to ABC's report, the black box (cockpit recording device) indicated that the collision took place at 9:45 pm, but passengers weren't notified to evacuate until 10:50.

A South Korean couple celebrating their honeymoon, were trapped in their cabin for 30 hours before being rescued.

The cruise industry has become a huge business, carrying more than 16 million passengers every year. Cruise ships have become larger and larger, sometimes being described as floating cities. Though the Costa Concordia is a massive vessel, it ranks only as 29th largest. It is 952 feet long, with 17 decks and 1,500 cabins. With such large ships and so many above-the-waterline cabins with sea views and verandas, cruise lines have been able to attract less-than-wealthy passengers.

According to a recent BBC report, "these larger ships have helped cruise liners cut prices, so during the past two decades the industry has experienced annual growth in passenger numbers of some 7.4 percent, as cruises have become a holiday of choice for ordinary people as opposed to being a pursuit only the wealthy could afford."

It is a lucrative business.

The chairman and CEO of Costa Cruises, Pier Luigi Foschi, was compensated a total of \$4,500,000 in 2009, according to Forbes Magazine. Carnival Cruise Lines, Costa's mother company, reported an average of 13.8 percent growth over the last four quarters with a projected yearly revenue of \$15.86 billion. The CEO of

Carnival Cruise Lines, Micky Arison, made \$7,200,000 in 2009, with a personal net worth of \$6.1 billion, placing him at 75th on the *Forbes* list of the 400 richest Americans.

The cruise ship company undoubtedly has its own reasons for changing their story in relation to the ship's captain. Carnival Cruise Line's stock value fell 17 percent on Monday as a result of the catastrophe.

Even though immediate losses are likely to be covered by insurance, analysts are predicting that Carnival Cruises could suffer a 30 percent decline in profits. The timing of the disaster could not have been worse for the corporation, coming in the midst of its heaviest booking season.

It is to the advantage of the business to deflect any scrutiny from its own practices, such as hiring and training, to a single "irresponsible" individual. The corporation, above all, wants to avoid any implication that the disaster is the outcome of systemic safety problems in its operations and that of the industry as a whole.

In particular, the Concordia disaster calls into question the safety of the larger, more profitable cruise ships, which are more difficult to navigate and cannot pass through channels used by smaller vessels. The large passenger loads also serve to magnify the problem of inadequate training of crew members in safety and emergency response.



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