

Death toll likely to rise in Italian cruise ship tragedy

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As divers continued the exploration of the wreck of the cruise liner Costa Concordia six days after the ship capsized, hopes dimmed of finding any more survivors. The number of deaths confirmed as of Wednesday was eleven. At least 23 passengers and crew members are missing.

When the ship hit rocks close to the Tuscan island of Isolo Giglio last Friday, it was carrying more than 4,200 passengers and crew.

Experts have warned of an environmental disaster should the ship break apart and leak its estimated 50,000 gallons of fuel into the waters around the island and the Tuscan coast.

Reports on the circumstances surrounding the incident point to grave negligence on the part of the ship's captain, Francesco Schettino. He is alleged to have steered the ship too close to the coastline to allow passengers to wave to inhabitants of the island. According to the management of Costa Cruises, which runs the Costa Concordia, the course of the ship had been correctly logged and maps on the liner indicated the proximity of dangerous rocks adjoining the island's cliffs.

Schettino is also alleged to have broken the basic code of seamanship, which demands that the captain remain on board a sinking ship until all passengers have been safely removed. Instead of staying at his post and directing the evacuation of the ship, Schettino is alleged to have given a false message to passengers, concealing the fact that the hull of the liner had been breached, and then quit the ship in a lifeboat.

A tape has emerged of a conversation by a local coastguard official, who angrily demands that Schettino re-board and take control of his sinking ship. Schettino is currently under house arrest and is expected to face a number of serious charges, including manslaughter.

Der Spiegel indicates that in Schettino's skirting of the picturesque island in order to provide a scenic thrill for passengers and on-lookers was by no means exceptional. According to the article, the mayor of Isolo Giglio, Sergio Ortelli, wrote an email last August to a captain employed by Costa Cruises thanking him for passing close by the resort island. The mayor praised the captain for providing an "unequalled spectacle" that had become an "indispensable tradition" enjoyed by "the country's most beautiful island for years."

After initially claiming that the reaction of Schettino had been appropriate, the management of Costa Cruises announced on Sunday it was convinced that human error on the part of the captain was the major factor in the disaster.

If the reports on the behaviour of the captain are confirmed, there is no doubt that he was guilty of severe negligence. However, the manner in which the company rapidly lined up behind all those seeking to pin exclusive blame for the disaster on the captain suggests a damage control exercise designed to cover up broader economic and commercial issues.

There are huge sums of money at stake. The rise to prominence of the US-based Carnival Corporation, of which Costa Cruises is a subsidiary, epitomizes the explosive growth of the holiday cruise line industry. The company was founded in 1972 by Ted Arison and initially ran just one ship between Miami and Puerto Rico. Today, Carnival Corporation is the world's largest cruise line operator, with 101 ships and 85,000 employees. Its ships carry a total of eight million passengers, and in 2010 the company reported revenues of \$14.5 billion.

Following the capsizing of the Costa Concordia, Carnival Corporation shares slumped and company

executives expressed fears of a drop-off in bookings at a crucial time of year for the industry.

The expansion of the cruise line industry has been accompanied by a rapid growth in the size of individual ships. In recent years, cruise liners have doubled in size from 80,000gt to over 160,000gt. The latest generation of ships can carry more than 6,000 passengers and 1,800 crew members. The number of decks has been increased to expand cabin capacity. Bulky leisure facilities, such as multiple swimming pools, reduce the stability and manoeuvrability of the vessels in operation.

Many of the photos of the capsized Costa Concordia prominently show its row upon row of decks plus a huge slide leading into one of the ship's swimming pools.

A number of the more recently built "mega ships" have been constructed with a relatively shallow draft, enabling them to approach close to land and avoid the use of tenders.

Concerns about the safety of modern cruise ships have been raised on a number of occasions by professional bodies. In 2000, the secretary general of the International Maritime Organisation (the United Nations agency that sets safety standards for shipping) cited 12 passenger ship accidents in the previous six years and concluded: "... in retrospect we can see that it was to some extent a matter of luck—good weather, calm seas, and other ships in the vicinity, for example—that very few lives were lost."

The International Center for Cruise Research registers nearly thirty major incidents involving cruise liners since the start of the current century, including the grounding of the Norwegian Crown off the coast of Bermuda in 2006 (in 1999 another ship owned by Norwegian Cruise Lines collided with a container ship in the English Channel), the fire aboard the Star Princess on route to Jamaica, also in 2006, and the explosion onboard the Queen Mary 2 off the coast of Spain in 2010.

A number of Maritime organisations and specialist web sites have also drawn attention to the problems of regulating the rapidly expanding industry. Extensive legislation does exist to cover the transport of passengers by sea, but there is considerable pressure on companies and ships' crews to cut corners in order to maximise profits.

The training of the liner crew has also been raised as a contributor to the scale of the casualties. While the training of officers and key crew members on the deck and in the engine room of a modern liner is extensive, a large proportion of the crew conducting more menial forms of work receive only minimal training with regard to safety procedures. Many of these crew members are low-paid workers from Asian countries, who are often not fluent in the language used by passengers. A repeated complaint of passengers able to escape from the Costa Concordia was the lack of expertise on the part crew members to provide adequate assistance in an emergency.

Beyond the role played by the captain, an examination of the broader issues involved in the capsizing of the Costa Concordia suggests that it was an accident waiting to happen.



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