

Thirty-three crew members presumed dead after sinking of cargo ship during Hurricane Joaquin

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The 33 crew members aboard the 735-foot cargo ship *El Faro* are all believed to have perished after the ship capsized during Hurricane Joaquin last Thursday. If confirmed, this would be the worst cargo ship disaster since 1983.

So far, one unidentifiable body has been found inside a survival suit, while debris from the sunken ship has spread over a 225-square-mile field. Rescue crews with the Coast Guard are continuing to scour the Caribbean Sea, having already searched over 20,000 square miles of ocean using radar.

El Faro departed from Jacksonville, Florida at 9:32 p.m. on Tuesday, headed for San Juan, Puerto Rico. At that time Hurricane Joaquin was still classified as Tropical Storm Joaquin, with winds estimated at roughly 65 miles per hour. By Wednesday night the storm was reclassified as a Category 3 hurricane, with winds exceeding 115 miles per hour and waves upwards of 30 feet. *El Faro*'s crew issued a distress call to the Coast Guard, reporting that the ship had sustained flooding, had lost propulsion and was listing 15 degrees.

Communication was lost with the crew on Thursday morning at around 7:30 a.m., as Hurricane Joaquin was reclassified as a Category 4, with winds reaching 145 miles per hour and waves capping at upwards of 50 feet. In their discussions with the crew of *El Faro*, the Coast Guard warned that the 391 containers topside would lead to further listing.

Search crews are operating under the assumption that the ship capsized in close proximity to its location during the last phone call, 35 nautical miles north of Crooked Island, Bahamas.

At 41 years old, the *El Faro* was long past its prime

and clearly should not have been sent into any type of extreme weather conditions. Vincent Brannigan, a professor emeritus of law and technology at the University of Maryland, told the *Bangor Daily News*, "It's got all the problems of an aging ship. 1975, that's a long time ago for this type of ship."

Nevertheless, the company that owns the ship, TOTE Maritime, evidently ordered the captain to carry out its voyage. On a website providing updates on the search for surviving crew members, the company admits, "TOTE Maritime Puerto Rico authorized the sailing knowing that the crew are more than equipped to handle situations such as changing weather."

Seeking to divert attention from their negligent practices, the company shifted responsibility to the crew itself, declaring, "Our crew are trained to deal with unfolding weather situations and are best prepared and equipped to respond to emerging situations while at sea."

According to NBC News, after news of the tragedy broke, TOTE Maritime president Tim Nolan callously declared that the extreme 15-degree tipping was "manageable."

Various news outlets have also reported the company as claiming that the captain of the ship chose to continue its voyage after the tropical storm was reclassified as Hurricane Joaquin. As no recordings or communications between the ship, management or the Coast Guard have been released, it remains to be seen who ordered the initial passage of the ship, as well as the continuation of the voyage after the reclassification to Hurricane Joaquin. Former employees for the company, however, have already expressed their outrage and beliefs as to who bears responsibility for

this tragedy.

Speaking to NBC News, former El Faro crew member Kenneth Benton succinctly attributed the tragedy to “profit and ego.” Expressing the widely shared sentiments of the families of El Faro crew members, Benton declared, “Safety of life at sea should come first.”

Another anonymous worker told NBC News, “You have got to be kidding me, it was a suicide mission. You never should have sailed through those waters, period.”

Second mate Danielle Randolph sent an email to her mother while aboard the ship, writing, “Not sure if you have been following the weather at all, but there is a hurricane out here and we are heading straight into it; category three, winds are super bad and seas are not great. Love to everyone.”

Rochelle Hamm, whose husband Frank was on board the El Faro, told *First Coast News*, “Normally my husband tells me that they have a different route that they take go around the storm. I don’t know why they didn’t just steer the ship in a different direction. This is totally unacceptable.”

Outside of the deaths of those aboard El Faro, Hurricane Joaquin wrought immense damage on the small island nations of Bermuda and the Bahamas. Hundreds of homes were destroyed when Joaquin first hit land in the Bahamas, while in Bermuda thousands of power outages were reported Sunday, along with massive flooding.

On Monday, despite the dissipation of the hurricane, intense storms battered much of the eastern United States. Georgia and parts of New Jersey experienced severe flooding, while the Carolinas bore the brunt of the rainfall, setting historic flooding records. Thousands of residents lost power, with many thousands more expected to lose power in coming days.

The presumed deaths of the entire crew aboard El Faro, as well as the widespread damage wrought by flooding from Hurricane Joaquin, both point to the irrationality of a social system, capitalism, that places private profit before the needs of society as a whole.



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