

FBI opens criminal investigation into Baltimore bridge collapse

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The Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) has opened a criminal investigation into the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore, which fell after a container vessel, the MV Dali, struck one of its support pillars in the early morning hours of March 26. The investigation comes as new details emerged about the state of the massive cargo ship before it began its voyage out of the Port of Baltimore, which ended about 45 minutes later when the ship collided with the bridge.

On Monday morning at 6:30 a.m., FBI agents boarded the 985-foot (300-meter) ship with search warrants, arriving in four boats. After news agencies began asking about the ship boarding, the agency said there was “no other public information available and we will have no further comment.”

While the FBI is not saying so publicly, the *Washington Post*, which broke the news of the investigation, cited anonymous FBI officials familiar with the probe who said authorities are examining the timeline of events before the crash and whether any of the crew knew the vessel had critical problems with its electrical systems before it left port bound for Sri Lanka with about 4,700 containers.

Agents removed physical evidence as well as data from inside the Dali, the sources said. Investigators with the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) and US Coast Guard, which are conducting their own, separate probes into the incident, had previously removed the “black box” recorder from the vessel. The agencies plan to release their preliminary report on the investigation in May.

The FBI’s involvement is unusual for a ship crash, and the fact it is conducting a criminal investigation into actions by the crew implies they are searching for potential evidence to scapegoat one or more of the crew members.

If, as seems likely, there were critical problems in the ship’s system, this is above all due to the negligence of the ship’s owners and operators. The ship has a history of problems. In June 2023, inspectors in Santiago, Chile, found deficiencies with the propulsion and auxiliary machinery. And in 2016 the Dali was involved in a collision in Antwerp, Belgium.

It is not clear what possible criminal charges the agency could bring against the ship workers, but given the incident resulted not only in the collapse of a major piece of infrastructure, but the deaths of six people, the FBI can pursue a variety of avenues in its investigation.

One anonymous government official told *USA Today* the FBI’s involvement was likely because the agency leads terrorism investigations. While there is no evidence the bridge collapse was connected in any way to terrorism, this unnamed official said the FBI would examine any possibility closely.

Another angle the FBI may take in its probe could lead to charges of criminal negligence resulting in death. Officials in Baltimore and Maryland, such as Governor Wes Moore and Mayor Brandon Scott, have said they will seek to hold accountable anyone found to be partly responsible for the incident.

There were 21 crew members aboard the Dali, plus two local pilots to guide the vessel out of the port into the federal shipping channel that joins the Patapsco River to the Chesapeake Bay, and from there on to ports all over the world.

In addition to the revelation of the FBI probe, on Monday it also emerged that the Dali had experienced electrical problems while docked at port. According to the Associated Press, alarms on refrigerated cargo containers went off, meaning there was not a steady power supply. The NTSB has also noted electrical issues as a potential focus of its investigation.

Given the timeline for reopening the shipping channel into the Port of Baltimore has the channel and the Dali cleared away by the end of May, the FBI probe may also be in part a way to ensure the crew cannot leave the country after the vessel is refloated and moved elsewhere for repairs and salvage, or sold for scrap. The crew, mostly composed of workers from India, has been stuck on the Dali for the last three weeks.

Video from the bridge strike shows it lost power in the minutes before it struck the bridge. The emergency generator did not restore propulsion power in time for the ship to correct its collision course.

Loss of power and propulsion on cargo vessels is, in fact, far from uncommon. The MV APL Qingdao lost propulsion near the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge in New York City just 10 days after the incident in Baltimore.

One analysis by *USA Today* found more than 6,000 incidents in the last 22 years on cargo ships, oil tankers, container barges and cruise ships in the US alone—about five per week—where crews reported either a loss of power, loss of propulsion, or a loss of steering.

Another analysis by the *Washington Post* found that, in the last three years, some 424 cargo ships exceeding 600 feet in length reported loss of propulsion in US waters, with approximately 25 percent of those incidents occurring near ports, bridges or other major infrastructure.

Ships lose power due to a variety of reasons, some as simple as fish getting clogged in water intakes. Lightning strikes and fires can also cause ships to lose power. In other instances, maintenance is the key factor, as sludge accumulates in the massive engines over time, or leaks can allow water into the fuel supply, degrading it.

The fact that loss of power and propulsion, such as what occurred on the Dali, is such a common event in the maritime industry is significant given the sheer volumes transported by large container ships moving in and out of ports around the world. Although collisions with major infrastructure are rare considering the number of cargo ships in operation, the conditions for such incidents are far more present than many people outside the shipping industry realize.

Even as the FBI contemplates charging individual workers with crimes for being unfortunate enough to find themselves on a ship with such issues, the main

parties responsible for the disaster, the profit-driven companies that own and operate vessels such as the Dali, are already working to wash their hands of the incident, aided by the regulators meant to hold them accountable.

Six days after the incident in Baltimore, the owner of the Dali, Grace Ocean Private Limited, and its manager, Synergy Marine Private Limited, filed a preemptive petition in Maryland court seeking exoneration from damages related to the accident that exceed \$43.6 million. Grace Ocean and Synergy Marine arrived at this figure by taking their estimated value of the Dali (\$90 million), adding the estimated value of the freight (\$1.1 million), and then subtracting the expenses of repairing the ship (\$28 million) and salvaging it (\$19.5 million).

The companies pointed to the Limitation of Liabilities Act of 1851, which lets vessel owners limit their liability claims. The owners of the Titanic used the same law to limit payouts to victims of that disaster.

The companies are working to shield themselves from liability in cases that will include claims from the families of the eight workers who were on the bridge when it fell.

On Monday, the body of the fourth worker to be recovered from the Patapsco river was found. Dive teams located Carlos Daniel Hernandez inside of one of the construction vehicles that some of the workers were in at the time of the crash.

The bodies of Maynor Suazo Sandoval, Dorlian Castillo Cabrera and Alejandro Hernandez Fuentes have also been recovered. The bodies of two of the workers who perished are still missing. Two other construction workers who were on the bridge at the time of its collapse survived.



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