

# Criminal charges filed against ship operators in Baltimore's Key Bridge collapse that killed six workers

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On May 12, federal prosecutors publicly announced criminal charges—unsealed the previous day—against the operators of the MV Dali container ship, whose collision with Baltimore's Francis Scott Key Bridge on March 26, 2024 killed six construction workers and caused one of the worst infrastructure disasters in recent American history.

The indictment, announced by the US Department of Justice (DOJ), names two Singapore-based corporate entities—Synergy Marine Pte Ltd., headquartered in Singapore, and Synergy Maritime Pte Ltd., based in Chennai, India—as well as Radhakrishnan Karthik Nair, 47, an Indian national who served as the Dali's technical superintendent. All three defendants are charged with conspiracy, willfully failing to immediately inform the United States Coast Guard of a known hazardous condition, obstruction of a federal agency proceeding and making false statements.

The two Synergy corporations are additionally charged with misdemeanor violations of the Clean Water Act, Oil Pollution Act, and Refuse Act for the discharge of oil, shipping containers and other pollutants into the Patapsco River and the Chesapeake Bay.

Six workers—Alejandro Hernandez Fuentes, 35; Dorlian Ronial Castillo Cabrera, 26; Maynor Yasir Suazo-Sandoval, 38; Carlos Daniel Hernández, 26; Miguel Angel Luna Gonzalez, 49; and José Mynor López, 37—were undertaking repair work on the bridge when the MV Dali struck it. They died when the central span of the bridge collapsed 200 feet into the frigid waters below. All were immigrant workers from Mexico and Central America, employed by a contractor to do maintenance on the bridge roadway. Two other

workers who fell into the water survived.

According to the indictment, the Dali lost power twice within a four-minute span as it navigated out of the Port of Baltimore, bound for Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Investigators say a loose wire in a high-voltage switchboard caused the first blackout. After the ship briefly regained power it lost power again because the defendants had allegedly configured the vessel to rely on a flushing pump to supply fuel to two of its four generators. That pump, unlike the properly designated fuel supply pumps, was not designed to automatically restart following a power outage. With no fuel supply, the generators failed again and the crew lost control of steering. The indictment states that, had the vessel used the proper pumps, it would have regained power in time to safely pass under the bridge.

Prosecutors allege that Synergy knew of this problem. The same flaw had manifested itself on two sister ships. Moreover, the Dali had experienced two blackouts while still in port the day before the collapse—events that Synergy neither investigated nor reported as required. According to the Justice Department, superintendent Nair then provided false statements and documents to the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) as it conducted its casualty investigation, claiming he had no knowledge that the flushing pump was being used to supply fuel to the generators.

The criminal charges follow a series of civil settlements. In October 2024, the DOJ reached a \$101.9 million settlement with Grace Ocean Private Limited, the ship's owner, and Synergy Marine, covering the federal government's costs in responding to the collapse—wreckage removal, dive operations and port remediation. That sum went to the US Treasury and

federal agencies, not to the families of the dead. Last month, Maryland Attorney General Anthony Brown announced a separate \$2.24 billion settlement between the state of Maryland and the ship's owner and operator, resolving claims related to the reconstruction of the bridge, which is estimated to cost between \$4.3 billion and \$5.2 billion. The bridge is not expected to reopen to traffic until late 2030.

As the WSWS has reported since the earliest days of the disaster, the framing of these legal proceedings—and now the criminal indictment—are carefully constructed to confine culpability to the ship's operators, while shielding government officials from any accountability for the bridge's catastrophic vulnerability. The criminal charges, like the DOJ's earlier civil settlement, treat the disaster as a product solely of corporate misconduct aboard the Dali, and make no reference to the decades of neglect that left the bridge structurally defenseless against a collision of this kind.

The Key Bridge opened in 1977, designed at a time when container ships were a fraction of the size of modern vessels like the Dali, which displaces 95,000 tons of water. As the NTSB itself concluded in its accident investigation, the ship was nearly 30 times above the acceptable risk threshold set by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO).

That threshold had been established in 1991, following the collapse of Tampa Bay's Sunshine Skyway Bridge under near-identical circumstances. Maryland was never required to assess the Key Bridge under those standards, because the 1994 federal rules mandating vessel collision risk assessments applied only to newly constructed bridges. State authorities never conducted such an assessment voluntarily. Had they done so, the NTSB found, Maryland would have known the bridge was catastrophically exposed and could have taken measures to reduce that risk.

The WSWS noted at the time of the \$102 million DOJ settlement that the federal government's legal actions "failed to address negligence at all levels of government regarding the subordination of society to the dictates of private profit." Standard protective measures: concrete collision barriers known as dolphins; redundant structural piers; mandatory tugboat escorts for large vessels in narrow channels were absent at the Key Bridge. None of these deficiencies have

featured in any criminal or civil proceeding.

The indictment of Nair, the ship's technical superintendent, illustrates particularly clearly how this type of "accountability" operates. A mid-level technical manager faces criminal prosecution while the corporate executives who presided over the broader pattern of cost-cutting and deferred maintenance across the Synergy fleet are charged only as corporate entities. State and federal officials, who for decades approved the continued operation of an aging bridge over a channel now routinely crossed by ships of a scale its designers never envisioned, face no legal exposure whatsoever.

As the WSWS wrote in the immediate aftermath of the collapse, "such disasters are inevitable in a society where all decisions are totally subordinated to profit interests." The criminal indictment announced this week does not challenge that arrangement. It manages it—assigning criminal blame to foreign corporate defendants and a foreign national while leaving untouched the political and economic structures that made the disaster possible. Civil litigation on behalf of the families of the six dead workers is ongoing, though the indictment may cause delays.



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