

Cruise Ship Incident Illustrates Importance of Emergency Preparedness



Given that April 15 is the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the *Titanic*, many people have likely asked themselves, “Could it happen again?” Unfortunately, that question was answered in the affirmative on Jan. 13, 2012, when the *Costa Concordia*, a huge Italian cruise ship carrying 4,200 passengers and crew, struck a rocky reef in the shallow water, causing a 49-metre long breach of her hull.

What happened—and didn’t happen—next is a tragic illustration of the importance of emergency preparedness.

For example, the Italian Coast Guard didn’t find out what had transpired from Capt. Francesco Schettino but from passengers who called police on their cell phones. Schettino didn’t send out a distress call until about an hour after the ship, listing heavily to starboard, had struck the reef. By then it was extremely difficult to launch lifeboats from the ship’s port side.

Passengers on board the ship said they weren’t given instructions on how to evacuate the ship. As a result, many panicked as they tried to evacuate the liner through darkened hallways.

Meanwhile, the captain literally abandoned ship—Schettino

climbed into a lifeboat and left the stricken ship, while many passengers, including women and young children, remained on board. According to Italian media, Schettino told investigators he had left the ship accidentally after tripping and falling into a rescue craft. Really'!

Schettino has been arrested and may face charges of manslaughter, causing a shipwreck and abandoning a ship while people were still on board.

As of Jan. 18, 11 of the ship's passengers were confirmed dead and 23 others were still missing.

In a statement released two days after the incident, Costa Cruises said preliminary indications suggest that "there may have been significant human error on the part of the ship's master, Captain Francesco Schettino, which resulted in these grave consequences. The route of the vessel appears to have been too close to the shore, and in handling the emergency, the captain appears not to have followed standard Costa procedures."

But what about the rest of the crew? Passengers have described the situation as sheer chaos, saying they were only helped by people like wait staff and maids—and each other. "Where were the officers?" asked one.

It appears that some junior officers became so frustrated with the captain's inaction and delay that they started hurrying terrified passengers towards the safety boats before he gave the order to evacuate.

The *Concordia* had held a lifeboat drill, as required by law, within 24 hours of embarking on the seven-day cruise. But there was no drill for the 600 passengers who boarded at Civitavecchia, the port of Rome. And let's face it—passengers don't exactly look forward to the drill and many don't even pay attention during it or take it very seriously.

As for the crew, it's unknown what kind of training they had in emergency procedures—if any.

Bottom line: Effective emergency preparedness and response procedures and training may have saved lives in this tragic incident.