

# Ship Captains Convicted of Criminal Charges in Fatal Sinkings



Criminal charges for safety incidents—even ones involving multiple fatalities—are rare. But in two notable international cases, the captains of ships that sank were not only accused of criminal charges but recently convicted.

In Jan. 2012, the *Costa Concordia*, a large Italian cruise ship carrying 4,200 passengers and crew, struck a rocky reef in shallow water. Thirty-two people, including five crew members, died.

Capt. Francesco 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 very hard to launch lifeboats from the ship's port side.

Because passengers hadn't been given instructions on how to evacuate the ship, many panicked as they tried to evacuate through dark hallways.

But 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.

On Feb. 11, 2015, a three-judge panel in Italy convicted Schettino of manslaughter and other criminal charges,

sentencing him to 16 years' jail.

A few months earlier, in Nov. 2014, a court in South Korea convicted the captain of a ferry that capsized and sank of gross negligence.

Lee Joon-seok was sentenced to 36 years in jail. Like Schettino, Lee also abandoned ship. Only 172 of the 476 passengers were rescued. And of the 304 confirmed dead or listed as missing, 250 were high school students.

The South Korea prosecutors were very aggressive, also going after the ferry's chief engineer, who was sentenced to 30 years in prison for homicide for not assisting two injured fellow crew members. They died.

The remaining 13 surviving crew members were also convicted and sentenced to between five and 20 years on various charges including criminal negligence and accidental homicide.

*Bottom line:* In both tragedies, effective emergency preparedness and response procedures and training may have saved lives.