

The Guardian
p. 2
30.11.2000



Life rafts from the Greek ferry, which sank in September Photograph: Yiorgos Karahalidis/Reuters

Head of ferry disaster company takes own life

Michael Howard in Athens

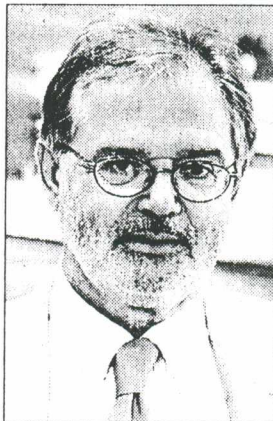
The Express Samina, which sank off the Greek island of Paros in September with the loss of 80 lives, claimed another victim yesterday as the vice-president of the company that owned the ferry leapt to his death.

Pandelis Sfinias, 62, jumped from his sixth-floor office in the port of Piraeus, apparently unable to live with the knowledge that the business he created, Minoan Flying Dolphins, was being blamed for one of Greece's worst sea disasters. Police said he died instantly.

The semi-official Athens news agency reported that Mr Sfinias was discussing the Samina tragedy with the head of another ferry company when he suddenly opened the window and jumped.

The Express Samina, carrying more than 500 passengers and crew, crashed inexplicably into a well-charted outcrop three miles from Paros on the night of September 26.

A judicial investigation has yet to come to any conclusion on the reasons for the disaster, although human error was initially cited as the chief cause. Some passengers alleged that crew members were watching a football match on TV at the time of the crash.



Pandelis Sfinias, who jumped from a window yesterday

The ship's captain — who was allegedly napping in his cabin — and the first mate are on remand facing manslaughter charges.

But the spotlight quickly turned to Greece's ageing ferry fleet, which transports more than 10m people a year, and to the near monopoly enjoyed by MFD.

Mr Sfinias masterminded MFD's aggressive intervention in the late 90s in Greece's coastal shipping market. By the end of last year it had bought up most of the family-owned shipping companies

plying lucrative Aegean routes.

But Greece's opposition New Democracy party claimed that the Socialist government of Costas Simitis had been too close to Greece's shipping companies and questioned how it had awarded operating licences. It alleged that profit had been allowed to come before safety.

In an attempt to shore up the credibility of the passenger fleet, the government suspended the operating licences of more than 60 Greek ferries pending safety upgrades. Most have since returned to service.

Although the Express Samina had recently passed an inspection, prosecutors are investigating claims that the vessel had propulsion and steering problems.

Since the Paros crash survivors, relatives and crew have filed compensation suits against MFD. Last week a court awarded £180,000 to one survivor. An appeal is pending.

The company also faces criminal charges for "exposing passengers to danger". Mr Sfinias was due to testify next month.

Friends said yesterday that following the disaster he had been racked by remorse and guilt. They suggested that the pressure of the pending lawsuits was the final straw.