

# Boss of Greek disaster ferry kills himself

By John Carr

THE general manager of a Greek shipping company whose ferry sank two months ago, killing at least 80 people, jumped to his death from his sixth-floor office yesterday.

Pandelis Sfinias, chief operating officer of Minoan Flying Dolphins, was held personally responsible by the Government and media for the loss of the island ferry, *Express Samina*, off Paros. While his fellow crew members were set free, recent reports had suggested that he would be indicted by the courts for his role in the sinking of the ferry, Greece's worst maritime tragedy.

Mr Sfinias was discussing the disaster with another shipping company executive when, without warning, he walked to his window and jumped out, the Athens News Agency reported. Greek television disclosed that, minutes earlier he had a visit from a diver who allegedly found that the *Express Samina* had a damaged hull before it struck the rock that sank it.

Mr Sfinias landed on a car parked directly below his office at the company headquarters and died instantly, police said. It was just a short distance from where the *Express Samina*, criticised by travel writers as a creaky grime bucket, had sailed on the evening of September 26 with 500 people aboard. It hit a rock five hours later and sank in a matter of minutes.

Mr Sfinias, 62, had been due to give evidence next week on the disaster which had plunged Greece into mourning. Media critics had homed in on his firm's policy of squeezing profits out of the allegedly unfit craft in a drive to achieve a virtual ferry monopoly in the lucrative Aegean Island market.

Minoan Lines and its Minoan Flying Dolphins subsidiary own a fleet of 86 ships, many of them pushing the 35-year age limit. The company is facing a £25 million compensation bill claimed by survivors of the *Express Samina* and relatives of the victims.

In spite of the criticism, Mr Sfinias had maintained his silence on the incident and had kept a low profile, not once emerging in public to defend his reputation. He had defended his company against claims that it ran unsafe ships, but

was expected to stand trial for mismanagement when the official investigation was completed.

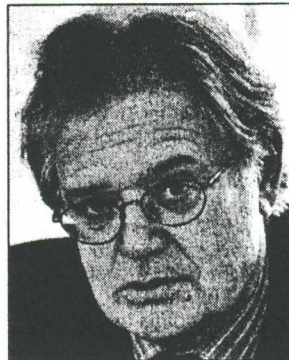
Employees said Mr Sfinias, a former booking clerk who became one of the country's most ruthless ship operators, seemed depressed in recent days.

When news of his death hit the Athens Stock Exchange, MFD shares plunged almost 12 per cent. Trading in the shares — until September among the best buys on the Greek stock market — was suspended until tomorrow. Reporters converging on the office were attacked by employees blaming the media for their company's financial woes.

Costas Simitis, the Prime Minister, expressed "deepest regrets" at the suicide. Christos Papoutsis, the Merchant Marine Minister and former European Commissioner, declined to comment, but had vowed earlier to smash the company's power.

What sent the *Express Samina* to the bottom remains unclear. The captain and first mate, accused of watching a televised football match at the time, are facing trial on charges of manslaughter.

Survivors described chaotic scenes during the sinking, with passengers plunging into dark stormy waters, often without life jackets. Many complained the crew were unhelpful and life-saving equipment inadequate.



Sfinias: faced charges of mismanagement