

f. r 2/10/2000 p. 2.

Greece bans 65 ships on safety grounds

By Kerin Hope in Athens

Greece has banned 65 elderly ferries and cruise ships from sailing on the grounds that they fail to meet European Union safety standards, following the sinking in the Aegean last week of the Express Samina with the loss of 77 lives.

The move will affect the busiest Aegean routes, with departures for resort islands being sharply reduced. The list of banned ferries includes 19 controlled by Minoan Flying Dolphins, owner of the Express Samina, and its parent group, Minoan Lines.

Christos Papoutsis, merchant marine minister, said the vessels had failed safety inspections for fire prevention and would be given three weeks to upgrade safety measures. The government has said it will review operating licences held by ferries older than the 27-year age limit set by the rest of the EU.

The European Commission on Friday asked the Greek government to provide details of the Express Samina's sinking, and ensure that EU maritime safety regulations were being observed.

In an interview with the

Greek newspaper Eleftherotypia, Mr Papoutsis said he would present draft legislation next month to speed the liberalisation of Greece's domestic shipping routes. He said routes would be opened to competition within 2002, ahead of an EU deadline of January 1 2004.

Greece was allowed by the EU to retain older ships and delay the lifting of restrictions on routes to renew its domestic ferries. But only one of 12 new fast ferries acquired by Greek companies operates in the Aegean.

The government faces criticism for allowing a series of takeovers by the Minoan Lines group, based in Crete, of smaller shipping companies, which gave it a dominant position in the Aegean market. The group acquired more than 40 ferries and hydrofoils last year but paid little attention to safety standards, according to the Greek seamen's union.

■ A Greek yacht taking 30 American tourists to the Aegean island of Santorini sank after hitting a rock off the island of Naxos on Saturday night. An 82-year-old tourist died of an apparent heart attack, but the others were rescued by fishing boats.