

UK ferries may break Greek monopoly

by Daniel McGrory in Athens

BRITISH ferry operators may be allowed to take over lucrative routes around the Greek islands in emergency measures promised by the Athens Government yesterday, after an elderly holidaymaker died when a tourist boat crashed into rocks and sank.

Public anger over 80 deaths at sea in the past five days forced beleaguered ministers to stop 65 ships sailing yesterday because of lapses in fire safety and lifesaving equipment.

Worried about the impact on the holiday trade, the Athens Government will this week announce a shake-up of its maritime industry which includes ending the monopoly that Greek shipping lines have on all its island routes.

Coastguard investigators yesterday said that they believed that the Greek captain involved in the latest sinking, near where the *Express Samina* was wrecked, was allegedly drunk. He was held for questioning as terrified survivors how the crew of the *Zeus III* could not inflate liferafts, and it was left to local fishermen, watching from the shore of Naxos harbour, to use their own boats to pull the 38 passengers and crew from the sea.

Rescuers said that Richard Ihde, an 82-year-old American, died as he was being rushed to the island's clinic.

Crews on some of Greece's most celebrated ferries and

cruise liners on the list of banned ships were yesterday ordered to stay in port.

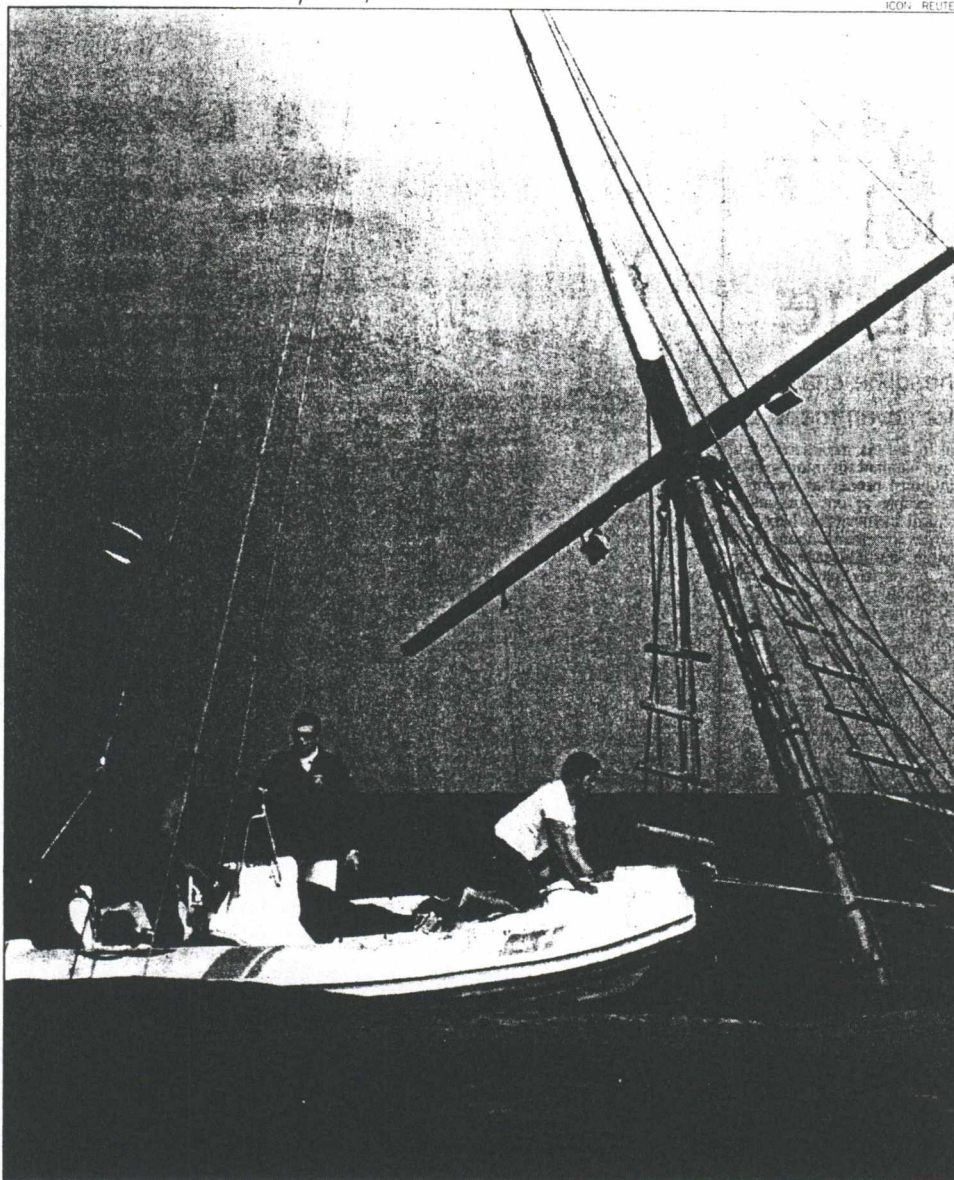
Bewildered sailors wandered around Piraeus harbour in Athens as their owners faced a 20-day ultimatum to meet strict European safety regulations or risk losing their licences, while many tourists were stranded.

Arsonists tried to burn down the Athens offices of Minoan Flying Dolphins, operator of the *Express Samina*, yesterday. Two men were seen throwing a flaming rag doused in petrol through a rear window but the fire did little damage.

The company, which is Greece's biggest operator, had 14 ships banned from sailing. Among them was the *Express Artemis*, which ran aground with 1,081 passengers on board after its engines failed as it was docking at Naxos only hours after its sister ship, the *Express Samina* ran on to rocks off the island of Paros.

Its captain, Vassilis Yiannakis, 53, and three of his crew were brought to court in handcuffs yesterday to face charges including reckless manslaughter. If he is found guilty he faces 15 years in jail.

Yesterday he mumbled his way through his account. Rubbing tears from his eyes, he said: "I feel shattered emotionally and psychologically. We did everything we could to save the ship." He stunned the court by asking to be taken back to his ship, lying 131ft



Greek rescuers search for survivors around the submerged yacht *Zeus III*, which sank with the loss of one life

under water. "It is my home. I was on her for 11 years."

Divers yesterday found the bodies of two women and a man trapped on a first floor salon of the ferry, bringing the official death toll to 79.

The ferry's owners, who are bracing themselves for the first compensation claims from bereaved families this week, are also being asked to explain why they allegedly covered up a written warning from one of its engineers about steering problems on the 34-year-old *Express Samina*

A week of shipping disasters

September 26: The *Express Samina* sinks off the island of Paros, with the loss of more than 70 lives. Vassilis Yiannakis, the ship's captain, and three other officers charged with manslaughter.

September 29: The *Express Artemis* ferry with 1,081 passengers aboard runs aground close to the port of Naxos.

September 30: The Greek Government bans 65 ships from sailing because it said that they failed to meet European safety standards.

October 1: The *Zeus III*, a tourist yacht carrying 38 passengers, sinks off Naxos, killing an elderly American man. A container ship also ran aground off the island of Psara.

Anastasios Sorokis, in a report seen by *The Times*, gave warning a week before the crash that the 4,500-ton ship

had steering problems. A company spokesman dismissed the warning as "an act of revenge" as the officer had been

fired following a work dispute.

Christos Papoutsis, the Merchant Marine Minister, said yesterday that he would recommend ending the Greek monopoly on ships sailing between its islands at this week's emergency Cabinet meeting when a seven-point plan to boost confidence in its maritime fleet would be unveiled.

His spokesman said: "It is a grim coincidence but much of this was planned before the tragedies. We had told ferry operators to observe EU safety guidelines by today."