

Ferry hits rock and sinks, many lives lost

Express Samina goes down off Paros after slamming into islet, leaving at least 63 dead; questions raised over crew's actions and ship's seaworthiness

Shaken by the tragedy of the loss of at least 63 people in a seemingly inexplicable shipping accident, Greeks sought yesterday to understand how a passenger ferry with more than 500 people aboard could ram straight into a brightly lit rock outcrop in the mouth of a harbor and sink with the crew doing little to help the passengers.

It was the worst shipping disaster in Greece since the sinking of the ferry *Iraklion* in 1966 with the loss of 226 lives.

Helicopters, ships and ground crews combed the stormy seas off Paros and its rocky coast on Wednesday for survivors and bodies of victims after the *Express Samina* passenger ferry struck the *Portes* islet three nautical miles out of the harbor and sank in less than half an hour late on Tuesday.

By early afternoon, 63 bodies had been found and officials said another eight people were missing. Drivers were to go down into the wreckage today to see if bodies were trapped inside.

Twenty people were hospitalized with exhaustion and minor injuries after spending hours in the water. It was not clear how many foreign tourists were aboard the *Express Samina*. The health clinic on Paros said that at least 60 of the survivors were foreigners. A Norwegian woman, Eli Hestnes Juul, 51, from Trondheim, was among the dead.

The ship had set sail for Paros, Naxos, Samos, Icaria, Patmos and Leipsoi from Piraeus at 5 p.m. on Tuesday with 468 passengers and 64 crew members. It was three nautical miles from the port of Paros at about 10.05 p.m. when it struck the islet — which is clearly marked on nautical charts and has a beacon on it.

"How could they have hit a rock with a light that you can see for seven nautical miles? That is the question," coast guard chief Andreas Sirigos commented. "You'd have to be blind to do that." The Cycladic islands' public prosecutor ordered the detention of five crew members, including the captain, the officer on bridge duty and the helmsman. The five face charges of murder.

"I have ordered a full investigation into the causes of the shipwreck and the apportioning of blame. I assure the Greek people that light will be cast on this naval tragedy which has stunned all of us," Prime Minister Costas Simitis said.

"There are great responsibilities everywhere, and they will be investigated," Justice Minister Michalis Stathopoulos said after a meeting with Simitis. He blamed "criminal negligence" for the accident.

Several survivors charged that the crew members had been arguing over who would watch the Panathinaikos-

Hamburg soccer match on which television set. This did not, however, imply that the crew on the bridge were watching the game when the ship hit the rock and was torn open like a sardine can. It sank in about 30 minutes.

Initial reports said that the ship had run aground and that the captain had ordered passengers and crew to abandon ship.

A flotilla of fishing boats and coast guard vessels, as well as helicopters from British warships that were sailing nearby, sped to the stricken ship's assistance, finding hundreds of people in the water. Greece's three newly purchased all-weather Super Puma helicopters were not employed during the night because their crews have not yet been trained for this.

The people of Paros mobilized to help the survivors. The island's deputy port captain, Dimitris Malamas, 40, suffered a heart attack and died during the rescue operation. Survivors spoke of sliding off the ship as it keeled over in the dark and struggling with the waves. Many said that crew members did not help them.

A union of merchant marine engineers said that one of their members, the *Express Samina*'s former chief engineer, had written a letter to the Merchant Marine Ministry claiming that the vessel had serious mechanical problems and announcing that he wanted to break his contract. But Piraeus's port captain, in a news conference, said that a committee of experts had subsequently examined the ship and found it to be seaworthy.

The *Express Samina* was built in 1966 and was due to be stripped of its Greek seaworthiness certificate next year, when it would reach the mandatory 35-year retirement age.

It was owned by Minoan Flying Dolphins and was formerly called the *Golden Vergina*. Minoan Lines' shares on the Athens Stock Exchange dropped nearly 12 percent yesterday. One travel guide called the ship "a boat to be avoided." (Editorial page 2, 3)



The islets of Portes, or 'The Doors,' stick out of the stormy Aegean, marking the spot where the Express Samina ripped its side open and sank, with the loss of at least 63 people, late Tuesday. Inset: A helicopter crew bring a victim's body to Paros airport.

Exemptions from EU law kept an old boat afloat

The shipwreck of the *Express Samina* has highlighted the advanced age of many Greek ferries. Some observers believe that the extent of yesterday's tragedy was partly due to the age of the *Samina*, since more modern boats have a series of watertight compartments and alarm systems that function even when the main generator is out of order.

Many old ferries will remain in operation until the age of 35, when they are due to be withdrawn from active service.

The 1988 European Union directive governing the age of ferries stipulates that ferries more than 27 years old must be refurbished in order to comply with safety standards. Under pressure from the Union of

Ferry Owners, the then Merchant Marine Minister Stavros Soumakis pleaded social and economic considerations to gain an exemption from this ruling, promising that boats would be withdrawn from service when they reached the age of 35. The EU accepted, on condition that such ships would not travel to ports outside Greece, indicating that they

would be unacceptable in European ports if not upgraded.

In 1998 the Greek government issued a presidential decree which contravened International Shipping Organization and EU regulations that recommend additional safety measures for old boats, according to Giorgos Tousas, president of the Panhellenic Union of Merchant Ma-

rine Engineers. The outcome, Tousas told Skai Radio, is that boats more than 32 years old and destined for retirement remain in operation for the final three years of their life without undergoing essential refurbishment.

The *Express Samina* was 34 years old and due for retirement next year.