

Cruise ship captain faces 12-year sentence

• 6th body found in Costa Concordia rescue mission

ROME, Italy (AP) — Rescuers raced against time and increasingly turbulent waters yesterday in search of survivors from the capsized Costa Concordia cruise ship off the Tuscan coast, while prosecutors focused on the captain, who is accused of abandoning the ship well before passengers were safely evacuated.

Authorities were holding ship captain Francesco Schettino for suspected manslaughter, and a prosecutor confirmed Sunday they were also investigating allegations the captain abandoned the stricken liner before all the passengers had escaped. According to the Italian navigation code, a captain who abandons a ship in danger can face up to 12 years in prison.

Schettino insisted he didn't leave the liner early, telling Mediaset television that he had done everything he could to save lives. "We were the last ones to leave the ship," he said.

A sixth body was discovered yesterday in the overturned vessel as the rescue mission entered its third day; 16 passengers and crew were still missing after the ship carrying 4,200 struck a reef off the island of Giglio. The body of the male passenger was spotted in a corridor of the part of the Costa Concordia still above water, fire department spokesman Luca Cari said. The victim was wearing a life vest.

"We are still working to pull the body out of the ship," Cari told The Associated Press. "The sea conditions make it difficult to get into the ship."

The number of the missing was raised after relatives of two Sicilian women who had been listed among those safely evacuated after Friday night's grounding told authorities they had not heard from them.

Giglio Mayor Sergio Ortelli said rescuers were in "one of the most important phases" as they sought those who may have found an air pocket. The mission includes a risky inspection of the underwater half of the capsized ship. But, he conceded to Sky News 24, the chances of finding survivors was dwindling.

Rising turbulence led to concerns yesterday that the ship — which has on board some 2,500 tons of fuel — could become unstable, creating the threat of a possible environmental disaster on top of the human loss. No leaks into the pristine waters have been reported so far, and a Dutch firm has been called in to help extract the fuel.

"The environmental risk for the island of Giglio is extremely high," said Environment Minister Corrado Clini said, according to the news agency ANSA. "The goal is to avoid that the fuel leaks from the ship. We are working on this. The intervention is urgent."

The ship's Italian owner, a subsidiary of Carnival Cruise Lines, issued a statement late Sunday saying there appeared to be "significant human error" on the part of Schettino, "which resulted in these grave consequences".

"The route of the vessel appears to have been too close to the shore, and the captain's judgment in handling the emergency appears to have not followed standard Costa procedures," Costa said in a statement.

“At this time, our priority is the safety of our passengers and crew,” Carnival CEO Micky Arison said in a statement.



Firefighters approach the cruise ship Costa Concordia, leaning on its side the day after running aground at Tuscan Island. (Photo:AP)