

Cruise ship captain admits 'mistake' in deposition

From Dan Rivers, CNN

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Giglio, Italy (CNN) -- In his answers to prosecutors, defense attorneys and a judge, the captain of the ill-fated cruise ship Costa Concordia admitted he made a "mistake" in colliding with rocks off the Italian island of Giglio.

However, in statements made during a phone conversation with a friend earlier this month, Capt. Francesco Schettino said managers pressured him to steer the ship to the area where the collision occurred, two Italian newspapers reported Wednesday.

Both Costa Cruises and authorities have criticized Schettino's behavior. He is under house arrest and faces possible charges of manslaughter, shipwreck and abandoning ship when the vessel struck rocks and rolled over onto its side in the waters off the island on January 13.

A 16th body was found Tuesday on the ship. Sixteen others are missing from the roughly 4,200 people aboard the cruise liner -- 3,200 passengers and 1,000 crew members -- at the time of the collision.

"I hit this projection of rock, that seems almost stuck into the ship, but this was my mistake," Schettino said in the 126-page transcript. "... There isn't anything I can say, as I was convinced that passing within .28 of a mile there wouldn't be any problem.

The captain also brushed aside suggestions that at 15 knots, he was going too fast, as alleged by prosecutors.

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"There isn't a speed limit," he said. "... We had more or less the speed needed to reach Savona on time."

According to the transcript, Schettino maintained he ran the ship aground to keep it from sinking. "This is what allowed me to limit the tilting," he said.

Maritime lawyer Jim Allsworth told CNN the maneuver is "fairly standard" in the case of a ship taking on water and in danger of sinking or capsizing. "The best thing to do is to put it aground to stop it sinking."

Italian newspapers La Repubblica and Corriere della Sera on Wednesday published excerpts from a telephone conversation Schettino had with a friend after his January 14 arrest.

The captain called his friend from the prosecutor's office, and authorities tapped the phone, the newspapers said. Schettino attorney Alessandro Antichi confirmed the wiretap but would not comment on the conversation. The information should not have been published, he said, as it is part of the investigation.

"In my place, someone else wouldn't have been so benevolent to have gone right under there, because they have pissed me off, go, go there," Schettino said, in an apparent reference to getting close to the island, according to the newspapers. "The shallows were there but it wasn't signaled by the instruments that I had and I went through ... in order to follow what the managers wanted."

The man behind the steering wheel, Jacob Rusli Bin, told investigators that after the ship struck the rocks, Schettino cursed and said he had not seen them, La Repubblica reported.

Speaking Wednesday before the Italian Senate, Costa CEO Pier Luigi Foschi gave an account of what occurred as documented by Roberto Ferrarini, the company's director of marine operations.

The first contact between Schettino and Ferrarini took place about 15 minutes after the collision, at 9:57 p.m. In the call, Schettino told Ferrarini of the crash and said the ship had lost power but assured him the ship could still navigate and the situation was being investigated. In subsequent calls, Foschi said, Schettino updated Ferrarini about the ship taking on water but insisted it could still navigate.

Foschi told lawmakers that Ferrarini reported Schettino was calm during the calls. The last call in which the captain reported the situation was under control came in at 10:33 p.m., he said. Two minutes later, Schettino called to tell Ferrarini the ship was being evacuated, Foschi said, adding that Ferrarini was surprised at the sudden change.

Ferrarini and Schettino continued to talk during the evacuation, Foschi said, but did not provide further details.

Costa cannot conduct an independent investigation because prosecutors seized the ship's data recorder, or "black box." The recorder had some connection problems but is working, Foschi said. It contains conversation recordings and navigation system data, he said.

Schettino's defense attorney, Bruno Leporatti, filed an appeal Wednesday of a judge's decision to place the captain on house arrest, Leporatti's office said in a statement. Both the prosecution and the defense are appealing the decision -- prosecutors because they believe Schettino should be in custody, and the defense because it believes he should have been released with no restrictions on his movements.

In his deposition, Schettino defended his decision not to evacuate the ship immediately.

"It's not like I can have a black out and immediately say, 'Let's all get out of here,' " he said. "Where do I send these people? I need to have the certainty and reach my decision on the fact that the ship is like that (no longer capable of floating). I am not going to put at risk the lives of 4,000 people."

Cruise ship passengers described a scene of panic and confusion as they rushed for lifeboats. Some said the crew seemed overwhelmed and did not have accurate information on what was taking place.

In the transcript, Schettino also described the chaos, saying he helped passengers onto lifeboats and that some became stuck because of the angle of the listing ship. He said he was trying to launch a lifeboat when he realized he was no longer on board.

"I was then on the lifeboat. It isn't as if I had boarded it," he said. "Look, I fell on its roof."

However, in the wiretapped conversation, Schettino tells the friend, "When I understood that the ship was tilting, I decided to leave, and left," according to Corriere della Sera.

A captain's leaving the ship with passengers still aboard is difficult to defend, said Italian criminal defense attorney Ugo Meucci, who does not represent Schettino.

"This is a very difficult position because our law is very strong, and the risk is very high for the captain," who could face a 15-year jail sentence, Meucci said.

Schettino has resolutely defended his actions after the ship hit the rocks, insisting he kept his bosses at Costa fully informed of the accident's severity.

"The gash (in the ship) was immense," the captain said in the wiretapped conversation. "There was this projection of rock, and then all what I did afterwards, I did it with my most professionalism, and this can help me alleviate or at least give me the illusion to be at peace with my conscience."

He tells the friend. "I'm proud of the fact that we saved almost all (the passengers). ... I went around picking up people at sea and I'm at peace."

Schettino also tells the friend, "I don't ever want to go back on ship."