

CQ

Matsui Cites Italian Crash in Calls for More Regulation of Cruise Industry

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Rep. Doris Matsui, who sponsored a 2010 law toughening regulations on the cruise industry, said this weekend's crash of an Italian vessel shows the need for tighter oversight of cruise ships.

The California Democrat, who wrote the "Cruise Vessel Security and Safe Act of 2010" (PL 111-207), said her legislative effort was "a major step forward in oversight of the highly unregulated cruise line industry," but she added that the sinking of the Costa Concordia, an Italian ship owned by parent company Carnival Corp., "underlines the critical need for greater regulation of the cruise line industry."

Cruise line safety is overseen by the U.N.'s International Maritime Organization (IMO) mostly with international conventions, but the organization has no real enforcement powers.

The IMO's Secretary-General, Koji Sekimizu, said Tuesday that people should not "pre-judge or speculate at this stage" before an investigation into the accident's causes has concluded. However, he also said that the IMO "must not take this accident lightly. We should seriously consider the lessons to be learned and, if necessary, re-examine the regulations on the safety of large passenger ships in the light of the findings of the casualty investigation."

Early indications are that the captain of the ship veered off his company-approved course to show off the boat to people on a small Italian island, and ended up striking a rock formation. Costa Cruises' CEO pinned the blame firmly on the captain.

The Cruise Lines International Association, a trade group for the industry, expressed condolences for the loss of life aboard the ship, but noted in a written statement that "accidents such as this one are an extremely rare occurrence in the cruise industry, and cruising continues to be one of safest means of travel among all types of vacationing."

At least 11 people on board the ship were killed and almost 30 were still reported missing as of Tuesday, according to the Associated Press, which cited Italy's coast guard. The ship ran aground near a marine sanctuary for dolphins, porpoises and whales, and there is concern that an environmental catastrophe could result if the vessel's fuel tanks rupture.

The 2010 law written by Matsui requires cruise ships carrying at least 250 passengers and boarding or disembarking passengers in the United States to meet specific design standards, including rails around the ships' decks, technology to detect if passengers fall overboard and portholes or other means of visual identification for staterooms.

The law also requires vessel operators to keep a logbook of crimes that occur, report all serious crimes to the FBI as soon as possible and offer medical and legal assistance to assault victims.