



Log M-310 SP-20

National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594
Safety Recommendation

Date: February 27, 1986

In reply refer to: M-86-17

The Honorable Carlos Romero-Barcello
Governor Commonwealth of Puerto Rico
La Fortalega
San Juan, Puerto Rico 00901

The Dominican Ferries Line M/V A. REGINA, a Panamanian-flag, 330-foot, 3,658-gross-ton, passenger carferry ran aground on the southeast coast of Mona Island, Puerto Rico, at 0020 on February 15, 1985, while en route from Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, to San Pedro de Macoris, Dominican Republic. After unsuccessful attempts to refloat the REGINA, the 72 crewmembers and 143 passengers were landed by the vessel's lifeboats and liferafts on Mona Island and subsequently flown back to Mayaguez. One crewmember was injured slightly when leaving the vessel. The stranded vessel, valued at \$5 million, was considered a total loss. ^{1/}

About 0040, 20 minutes after the grounding, the master began calling the U.S. Coast Guard on the radios, using VHF-FM channel 16 and 2,182 kHz. The master described the vessel's situation, advised that there was no immediate danger, and advised that it would be best to wait until daylight before having the passengers and crew leave the vessel. The master stated that the Coast Guard Station, San Juan, Puerto Rico, answered on channel 16 about 0115. Communications concerning the situation were continued thereafter with the Coast Guard.

About 0600, the Coast Guard Rescue Coordination Center (RCC) San Juan advised the REGINA's master that a U.S. Navy vessel, the USS JOSEPH HEWES, would arrive on scene about 0830. The arrival time was later changed to 1030. The Coast Guard initially planned that the REGINA's passengers and crew would be transferred to the HEWES. But the delayed arrival of the HEWES and the increasing seas prompted the master to decide to use the REGINA's lifeboats to take the passengers and crew ashore. The master requested the fishing vessel F/V CANTALICIO, which was anchored about 1 mile from the REGINA, to guide the REGINA's lifeboats through the reefs to shore. The master testified that he had expected the Coast Guard to send personnel to coordinate the abandoning of the REGINA and to assist in routing the lifeboats through the reefs to Mona Island.

At 0830, the master ordered the crew and passengers to put on lifejackets and to begin leaving the vessel by means of the lifeboats and several inflatable liferafts. The last of the passengers left the vessel by 1100. The CANTALICIO towed the lifeboats and liferafts to Mona Island. The crew and passengers were landed on Mona Island with their hand-carried luggage by 1130.

^{1/} For more detailed information, read Marine Accident Report—"Grounding of the Panamanian-Flag Passenger Carferry M/V A. REGINA, Mona Island, Puerto Rico, February 15, 1985" (NTSB/MAR-86/02).

The Coast Guard RCC San Juan was alerted immediately after the REGINA's message was received at 0043 on February 15. The RCC controller (watch officer) testified that it took a half hour to establish the identity and to determine the location of the calling vessel because of badly broken radio transmissions. After determining that the REGINA was not in immediate danger of sinking, and that the master planned to wait until daylight to land the passengers and crewmembers on Mona Island, the RCC controller notified the Coast Guard Air Station (CGAS) at Borinquen, Puerto Rico.

At 0130, the REGINA owner's representative at Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, was informed by the Coast Guard of the vessel's situation and told that it was the company's responsibility to remove the passengers from the vessel and to remove the grounded vessel from Mona Island.

At 0132, the Puerto Rico Search and Rescue (PR SAR) coordinator was notified by the Coast Guard about the grounded vessel. The PR SAR coordinator, a Puerto Rican government employee, served as liaison to the Coast Guard concerning the resources available on Mona Island.

At 0345, a helicopter from CGAS Borinquen was dispatched to the scene. The helicopter's pilot reported the geographic position and orientation of the REGINA on the reef. The helicopter landed near the old Mona Island lighthouse at 0447, and the crew remained onscene until 0647. The helicopter crew confirmed that the REGINA was in no immediate danger of sinking, and notified the Puerto Rico Department of Natural Resources (DNR) detachment on the island of the planned daylight landing of evacuees from the REGINA.

At 0540, the Coast Guard Operation Center, Miami, Florida, reported that the HEWES was en route and expected to arrive at the REGINA in about 3 hours. The RCC San Juan controller testified that it was initially planned to use the HEWES to transport the REGINA's evacuees to Puerto Rico.

At 0920, the REGINA's agent informed the Coast Guard that arrangements were being made by the company to transport the REGINA's evacuees by commercial aircraft from Mona Island to Mayaguez. At 1000, the agent reported that only one aircraft was confirmed, and he requested Coast Guard and Navy aircraft assistance. The Coast Guard officially requested helicopter assistance from the Navy at 1030. The agent was notified at 1123 that the Coast Guard would not commit its helicopters unless an "emergency situation" existed.

The HEWES arrived onscene about 1030 while the REGINA's passengers and crew were being transported to Mona Island. The HEWES was unable to use its small boats to transport persons from the beach because of surf conditions. No further effort was made to transfer the REGINA's evacuees to the HEWES by boats or helicopters. The HEWES remained onscene and its helicopter delivered hot food, soft drinks, and water to the evacuees on Mona Island. The commanding officer of the HEWES stated in a rescue report message that although Mona Island was a U.S. possession, he encountered a delay in obtaining permission from Puerto Rican authorities to land a helicopter on the island.

At 1216, the HEWES was requested by the Coast Guard to begin removing the evacuees from Mona Island. The HEWES responded that it would not be able to remove all of the persons by nightfall. At 1258, the REGINA's agent was notified that the HEWES would transport the evacuees to San Juan. At 1340, the HEWES informed the Coast Guard that its small boats were unable to transfer the evacuees from Mona Island because of surf and shore conditions. Shortly after 1400, the Coast Guard advised the HEWES and

the REGINA's agent that it was attempting to transport the evacuees from Mona Island with aircraft. The agent reported that the Puerto Rico DNR detachment on Mona Island would not allow the evacuees to land. By then the evacuees were already ashore, and the agent had contacted U.S. Customs Service officials concerning the status of the evacuees.

At 1439, the Coast Guard Commander, Greater Antilles Section (COMGANTSEC) authorized the use of a helicopter to transport children, babies, and pregnant women from Mona Island. At 1519, the Puerto Rico DNR advised the Coast Guard that Puerto Rico Air National Guard (PRANG) helicopters might be able to assist in the airlift and, at 1531, provided radio frequencies of the DNR radio station on Mona Island. Meanwhile, the Commander, Naval Forces Caribbean (CNFC) authorized the HEWES to remain overnight onscene, and to use its helicopter on Mona Island. Helicopters were used to deliver food and liquids to the evacuees, but the foodstuffs were not equitably distributed to the widely dispersed evacuees.

At 1647, the CNFC informed the Coast Guard that, at the request of the Governor of Puerto Rico, three helicopters from the Roosevelt Roads Naval Facility would be assigned for the airlift. The helicopters were onscene about 1900. The Puerto Rico Secretary of State informed the Coast Guard at 1705 that one or two PRANG helicopters were being provided for the airlift. The Coast Guard subsequently telephoned the PRANG command headquarters to confirm this information but got no response.

The first airlift with REGINA evacuees onboard departed the Mona Island airstrip at 1727 and arrived at Mayaguez at 1801. At 2140, airlift operations ceased because of nightfall and aircraft safety considerations. The aircraft hired by the REGINA's agent transported 44 persons, and Coast Guard, Navy, and PRANG helicopters transported 65 persons to Mayaguez.

On February 16, at 0604, the PRSAR reported that six PRANG helicopters capable of lifting six to eight persons each were en route from Mayaguez to Mona Island, and that a commercial aircraft had departed 1/2 hour earlier. At 1307, the REGINA's agent notified the Coast Guard that all persons were off the island except for the master and four crewmembers who were standing by the vessel.

The Coast Guard officially terminated its search and rescue case file at 0024 on February 17, but continued its activities relative to vessel salvage and pollution control. The RCC San Juan controller on duty when the REGINA grounded testified that RCC San Juan had not experienced a previous situation similar to the REGINA grounding on Mona Island.

The REGINA's grounding was considered a "nonemergency situation" because there was no immediate threat to life of the persons onboard. The RCC San Juan watch officer stated that the Coast Guard was responsible for search and rescue in the "maritime regions out to sea," and that the PRSAR was responsible for the "inland" regions. The Coast Guard considered the owners of the REGINA responsible for the rescue of the persons onboard and the removal of the vessel from the Mona Island reef. The two RCC San Juan watch officers who testified stated that they did not know whether a formal agreement existed defining the areas of responsibility between the Coast Guard and the Puerto Rican government for the situation created by the REGINA's grounding. One of the RCC San Juan watch officers stated that he did not know the location of the airstrip on Mona Island, and that there was "considerable confusion" as to who was providing guidance to the aircraft pilots during the airlift operations.

Although the Coast Guard considered the REGINA's grounding to be a nonemergency, the return of the evacuees to Mayaguez in this instance remained a significant element of a search and rescue operation, and COMGANTSEC had area responsibility for the operation. Because of the variety of agencies involved, centralized management control was needed to effectively use the resources available. In this instance, most of the transport vehicles employed to transport the evacuees were not those of the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard RCC San Juan served as the coordination center to some extent, but the management control of a typical search and rescue operation was lacking. The RCC San Juan controller stated that there was considerable confusion during the airlift. Since the events took place at a considerable distance from RCC San Juan, and radio contact difficulties were experienced, an onscene commander (OSC) might have alleviated some of the coordination problems that occurred. However, an OSC was not assigned in this operation. Had an OSC been assigned, better control of the vessel evacuation and the airlift might have been achieved.

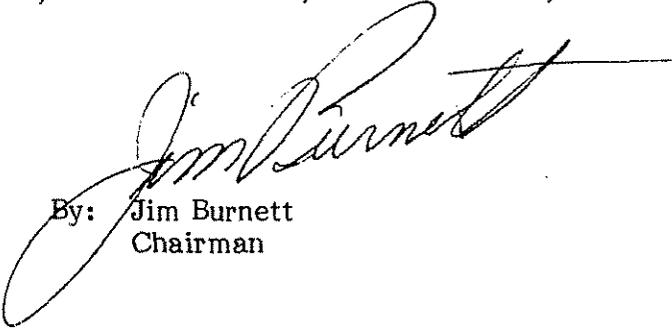
The Safety Board believes that there was a lack of effective coordination between the Coast Guard RCC San Juan and the Puerto Rican government in promptly handling the removal of the REGINA's passengers and crewmembers from Mona Island, and that there is a need for the Coast Guard to improve communications for handling similar incidents that may occur at isolated islands in the Caribbean Sea. The Board also believes that had the Coast Guard directed the use of PRANG, Navy, commercial, and its own aircraft resources more effectively when the need for an airlift was recognized, most if not all of the evacuees could have been removed from Mona Island before nightfall.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Governor of Puerto Rico:

Assist the U.S. Coast Guard in developing a memorandum of understanding concerning responsibilities, communications, and coordination of logistics among the agencies responsible for participating in various search and rescue emergency and nonemergency situations on the Puerto Rican offshore islands, such as the M/V A. REGINA grounding at Mona Island, Puerto Rico, on February 15, 1985. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-86-17)

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency with the statutory responsibility "... to promote transportation safety by conducting independent accident investigations and by formulating safety improvement recommendations" (Public Law 93-633). The Safety Board is vitally interested in any actions taken as a result of its safety recommendations and would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendation in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendation M-86-17 in your reply.

BURNETT, Chairman, GOLDMAN, Vice Chairman, and LAUBER, Member, concurred in this recommendation.


By: Jim Burnett
Chairman