

Cruise ship trial starts in Italy

GROSSETO, ITALY: Captain Francesco Schettino, dubbed Italy's "most hated man" by tabloids over the spectacular crash of his cruise ship Concordia in 2012 with the loss of 32 lives, went on trial on Tuesday (9 July) charged with manslaughter.



The 52-year-old, also dubbed "Captain Coward" over accusations that he abandoned ship while terrified passengers were still trapped onboard, looked tense as he arrived for the start of the trial in Grosseto.

It is being held in a local theatre in the city, the closest to the site of the wreck of the Costa Concordia on the island of Giglio, because a large numbers of survivors from the tragedy expected to attend.

Schettino, wearing large sunglasses and a bright blue suit, came in through the press entrance by mistake and was immediately mobbed by reporters. He fended them off and asked to be let through.

Schettino, who is not being detained during the trial, has asked for television cameras not to be allowed in.

"Otherwise it would be a film," he said in an interview with Italian daily Il Messaggero.

"There has been media havoc since the tragedy. This is not some village festival, this is a trial. There are people who died and a man who will try to explain," he said.

"I really think the truth will out," he added.

Trial halted

The hearing was cut short after just a few minutes because of a national lawyers' strike and the trial was postponed to 17 July.

With his slicked-back hair and macho swagger, Schettino has been portrayed as a villain who was showing off in front of a female guest by performing a risky "salute" manoeuvre which ended in tragedy.

"Madonna, what have I done?" he was heard gasping on audio recordings from the bridge just after the crash.

But his defence team has said that while he made mistakes he should not be the sole defendant and the ship's owner Costa Crociere, Europe's top cruise operator, should share at least some of the blame.

Lawyers for some survivors say he is a scapegoat. Locals in Grosseto also showed a degree of sympathy for the captain.

"We cannot just crucify Schettino," said 28-year-old Maria at a bar in the city centre.

As he unloaded groceries outside a store, Giacomo Melluso said: "Maybe it wasn't all Schettino's fault."

Witnesses, plaintiffs

Up to 450 witnesses and 250 plaintiffs could be called during the trial, which has been long awaited by the families of the victims and survivors who have complained about delays in Italy's justice system.

Trials in Italy can last for months or even years.

Schettino has been charged with multiple manslaughter, causing environmental damage and abandoning the ship.

The Costa Concordia crashed into a group of rocks off Giglio on the night of 13 January, 2012, with 4,229 people from 70 countries on board. The ship veered sharply and keeled over near the shore, sparking a panicky and delayed evacuation hampered by the failure of some lifeboats to deploy.

Hundreds of people who had been sitting down to dinner were forced to jump into the sea to escape, many of them still wearing their formal evening wear. Survivors described scenes "like the Titanic".

Among those who died were an Italian honeymooner who could not swim, a Frenchman who gave his wife his life jacket before they leapt into the sea and a Hungarian musician who went back to his cabin to get his violin.

The botched evacuation sparked a bitter confrontation between the coastguard and Schettino, who claimed he had fallen into a lifeboat because the ship was tilting at a 90-degree angle and said he was co-ordinating the rescue from the shore.

Four other crew members and a Costa manager have entered plea bargains with short prison sentences, which will be ruled on in a separate hearing on 20 July.

Costa earlier admitted limited responsibility as Schettino's employer and was ordered to pay €1m in a controversial ruling that has excluded it from criminal proceedings.

Source: AFP via I-Net Bridge