

Carnival Cruise Lines says it's caring for Costa Concordia victims

BY MARTINNE GELLER, REUTERS JANUARY 19, 2012 11:26 AM



Orange barriers are placed for leaking pollution near a side of the Costa Concordia cruise ship that ran aground off the west coast of Italy, at Giglio island January 17, 2012.

Photograph by: Max Rossi, REUTERS

Carnival Corp & PLC, whose luxury liner Costa Concordia capsized off the coast of Italy last week, said it was providing lodging, refunds and other support to people affected by the accident, even as some public relations executives criticized the company's handling of the situation.

"I give my personal assurance that we will take care of each and every one of our guests, crew and their families affected by this tragic event," Carnival Chief Executive Micky Arison said in a statement late on Wednesday - five days after the incident that left 11 people dead and 22 missing.

Costa Cruise Lines, a unit of Carnival and operator of the ship, has been arranging lodging and transportation for passengers and crew members to return home, and has offered assistance and counseling as needed. It has also begun refunding passengers their cruise fares and all costs incurred while on board.

The company also said it was contacting every passenger and crew member or their family and will be addressing personal possessions lost on board.

Public relations experts have chastised Carnival for being slow to address the disaster and vague about its response and efforts to prevent similar incidents in the future.

On a scale of one to 10, with 10 being "outstanding," Carnival's public relations strategy in the immediate wake of the disaster gets a four, said Allyson Stewart-Allen, director of International Marketing Partners, a consulting firm.

"It wasn't quick, it wasn't specific, it wasn't reassuring," Stewart-Allen said, noting that Carnival's first statement, released on Saturday nearly 24 hours after the Costa Concordia liner struck rock causing it to capsize, did not quote a specific person.

Subsequent statements on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday quoted Arison, who has been in continuous contact with executives in Italy, but has not flown there himself.

Arison, who also owns the Miami Heat NBA team, has written six messages on Twitter mentioning the tragedy, but Evan Nierman, founder of Florida public relations firm Red Banyan Group, said that was not enough.

"If he's the point person, I would want a constant flow of information - Twitter, Facebook, talking to reporters, letting them know what's going on. I would have him out there in a real way. He needs to be in front of cameras, he needs to be meeting with people, he needs to show that he's in charge of the situation."

A statement on Wednesday from Costa Cruises, owned by Carnival, said the Italian company commissioned salvage experts in the hours after the accident to draw up a plan to recover the fuel reserves from the ship before they leak into the water.

The ship's captain is being accused of causing the accident by steering too close to shore and then abandoning the vessel before the evacuation was complete. He was charged with multiple manslaughter and placed under house arrest on Tuesday.

Costa has said that in light of the accusations and continuing investigation, it would be inappropriate to comment further.

Regarding its safety procedures, a Carnival spokesman said the company is still waiting for further information from the investigation to understand the cause of the accident and that as the company finds out more, it will apply any lessons learned and update its procedures accordingly.

Still, Carnival's strategy could end up tarnishing its brand image, experts said, at a time that is crucial for the cruise industry, which is already grappling with a weak economy.

"This is the time, now through the end of March, when cruise bookings are at their highest. I would have thought you'd want to reassure travel agents, customers and partners (such as) airlines, hotels and car rentals agencies," said Stewart-Allen.

"There is a variety of stakeholders here who are really keen to feel reassured and I don't hear those messages," she added.