

Grande America conro sinks after fire in Bay of Biscay



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Container vessel Grande America (IMO 9130937), which caught fire on March 10th about 263km southwest of the Pointe de Penmarc'h, sank at 15:26 local time on March 12th. Owner Grimaldi said that the fire was "caused by some cargo loaded onboard the vessel and the firefighting operation by the crew had to be discontinued when the ship had to be abandoned in order to avoid any risk for the crew's safety".



"Despite the best efforts, last night the French Authorities decided to suspend the fire fighting operations, as the vessel had begun to sustain quite a considerable list," Grimaldi said. "Unfortunately with the weather worsening and the vessel's list getting more considerable, the Grande America sank today (March 12th) at 15:26 hours local time, at about 140 nautical miles south west from Brest and a depth of 4,600 metres".

The Grimaldi Group is now arranging, under the guidelines of the French Authorities, the prevention of any potential damage to the marine environment resulting from the vessel's sinking.

There were 27 on board who were evacuated onto Royal Navy frigate HMS Argyll during the early morning hours of March 11th, Maritime Prefecture of Atlantic said. The container RoRo vessel was en route from Hamburg, Germany to Casablanca, Morocco, when the fire broke out. The vessel lost power and drifted to the east. By Tuesday it was about 350km off the French coast.

About 10 containers were reported to have fallen off the ship. A maritime surveillance aircraft was attempting to locate these. Vessel operator Grimaldi had appointed Ardent to oversee salvage. The assistance of two tugs will be provided. Weather conditions were poor and were expected to deteriorate over Tuesday and Wednesday, temporarily limiting the rescue response.

The vessel had issued a distress call when the fire broke out and the crew tried to extinguish the fire, which apparently started in one of the deck containers. At first the captain had hoped to reach the port of La Coruna. However, the fire spread to other containers and by midnight on March 10th was out of control. At about 02:00 on March 11th it was decided to abandon ship.

The rescue of the 26 crew and one passenger by the HMS Argyll was not straightforward. Her sea boat nudged the lifeboat of the Grande America against the side of the frigate so that the vessel's crew could be brought aboard, but heavy seas meant that the vessels were rolling at 30

degrees.

The rescued were transferred that afternoon to Argonaute BSAA and were taken to Brest, with some requiring hospital treatment. The French Navy took over on-scene command.

The Maritime Prefecture (MPA) triggered level three of the maritime ORSEC plan. Shortly after 09:00 on March 11th frigate Aquitaine sailed from the military port of Brest with a Cayman Navy helicopter on board. At 10:00 the Abeille Bourbon arrived in the area with an evaluation and intervention team of six people on board. The MPA then asked the owner of the ship to take all necessary measures to stop the danger posed by the Grande America inside the French exclusive economic zone.

1997-built, Italy-flagged, 56,642 gt Grande America is owned and managed by Grimaldi Group of Naples, Italy. It is entered with North of England Club on behalf of Grimaldi Deep Sea SpA.

Hull & machinery is with Norwegian Hull Club (as arranger) and other insurers, among them Siat and Generali.

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