

Princess' still waiting a year after

The **MV Princess of the Stars** capsized off the coast of Romblon province in central Philippines nearly a year ago—on June 21, 2008—a tragedy that killed more than 700 passengers and crew. Nearly a year after, the ill-fated vessel remains capsized, nearly submerged—as officials waited for a court order to proceed with the retrieval that was released earlier this year, then a couple of months to mobilize people for the operation, and recently for weather to clear. Unfavorable weather conditions have hampered Phase 3 of the salvage operation of the Philippine Coast Guard, whose motion for authority to proceed was approved by the Manila Regional Trial Court Branch 24 in April. Phase 3 refers to wreck removal.

“According to the salvor [**Harbor Star**], they are mobilizing Phase 3 of the operation. But because of the weather conditions, medyo na-hamper yung operation [the operation was hampered a bit],” Capt. Enrico Evangelista, coast guard chief of staff, told The Manila Times on Friday. “The people are ready,” he added. “The equipment is ready. It’s just in the transport that we’re having problems because of the weather.” On April 14 this year, Judge Antonio Eugenio Jr. of the Manila Regional Trial Court 24 issued a directive that “it is the inherent duty of the PCG [Philippine Coast Guard] to retrieve from our seas all that may be considered hazardous to navigation.”

The order was in response to the motion for authority to proceed with the last phase of the wreck removal or retrieval that was filed by the Office of the Solicitor General in behalf of the coast guard. But Evangelista said the wreck removal operations would begin again as soon as the weather improves. “Once the weather has improved, and we can dispatch our team. Tuloy-tuloy na ang operation [The operation would proceed without delay].” Earlier, coast guard Commandant Admiral Wilfredo Tamayo ordered Royal Jessan Petromin Resources Inc. to proceed with the wreck removal through Harbor Star, the contracted salvage company of the coast guard.

Sulpicio Lines Inc., the shipping company who owns **M/V Princess of the Stars**, sold the wreck of the capsized ship to Royal Jessan in November 2008 for an undisclosed amount. But Tamayo stressed in a statement that Sulpicio Lines “should still be concerned or remain responsible for the third and final phase of the retrieval operations as possible human remains may still be discovered inside the wreck.” “Kasama na din sa removal kapag may remains silang nakita [Retrieval of any passengers’ remains they see is included in the removal of the vessel],” Evangelista said, adding that there were still many passengers who were unaccounted for. The coast guard believes most them were entombed in the 23,000-gross tons capsized ship. He added that 100 percent of the wreck was still at the bottom of Romblon’s coast.

Evangelista also said that Harbor Star reported that all the 400 boxes of Endosulfan – a dangerous insecticide known to affect the central nervous system – had been removed from the ship in October 2008. The **Princess of the Stars**, when it sunk at the height of Typhoon Frank, was carrying 10 metric tons of Endosulfan bound to southern Philippines, for the plantations owned by Del Monte and Dole Philippines Inc. The use of Endosulfan is restricted in the Philippines, with exceptions granted to Del Monte and Dole. The substance is so dangerous that the European Union has banned the chemical because of its high toxicity. Built in 1984, the **M/V Princess of the Stars** was the flagship of the Sulpicio Lines fleet and had a total passenger capacity of 1,992 people. When Typhoon Frank struck the Philippines in June 2008, the flagship, departed Manila despite signals two and three raised by the weather bureau over other parts of the country—including the area where the vessel was to pass. Metro Manila has declared a signal number

one while Cebu, where the ship was bound, was already under signal three. The ferry, according to reports, sailed through the typhoon. But along the way, its engine failed, and the ship ran aground.

This was not Sulpicio Line's first accident. It also owned the **M/V Doña Paz** that sank and killed 4,341 people; **M/V Doña Marilyn**, 300; and **M/V Princess of the Orient**, 150. Sulpicio Lines owners and executives have maintained that they were unaware of the new coast guard guideline preventing ships to sail in inclement weather. Evangelista said Phase 3, or the removal of the **Princess of the Stars** wreck, was the last stage of the coast guard's operation. "After matanggal ang wreck, tapos na ang operation ng PCG [After the wreck is removed, the coast guard's job is done], aside from the victims' claims . . . but that falls under the responsibility of Sulpicio Lines," he added.

Sulpicio Lines, on the other hand, said it remains committed in assisting government agencies in the identification of victims' remains that could be discovered inside the ship. But to date, a number of cases for the claims filed by the passengers' relatives—like the shipwreck off Romblon—were still waiting for action

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Ferry salvaging off Sibuyan Island begins

The salvaging of the ill-fated MV **Princess of the Stars** that sank on June 21 last year in the waters off Sibuyan Island, killing hundreds of its passengers, will begin this week, according to Romblon Rep. Eleandro Madrona in a phone interview on Saturday. Crewmen from the Royal Jessan Petromin Resources Inc. salvaging company, which was commissioned by the ship's owner Sulpicio Lines, were set to leave for Romblon today, said Madrona. "They will cut the upper board of the vessel and (then) pull out the cargos," he said, describing the process that could take two months. He did not confirm how long it would take to fully salvage the vessel, as he had yet to receive a copy of the "mobilization schedule" from Royal Jessan. The 23,824-ton vessel carried more than 700 passengers and crew when it sank at the height of "Typhoon Frank" (international code name: Fengshen) off Sibuyan at around noon of June 21, 2008.

Madrona said it took a while before the court issued an order for the salvaging of the vessel. Salvors also first retrieved the victims' bodies and finally extracted the toxic chemical cargo, endosulfan, that was claimed to belong to Del Monte. The chemical has been "kept secured" in a warehouse in Laguna, Madrona said. "Except for the daily sight that it (shipwreck) is still there, the situation has normalized," he said. The bow has remained above the water line. San Fernando Mayor Nanette Tansingco said the fishing town had recovered since then, although fishing was still prohibited one kilometer from the wreck.

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