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Cruise execs: Crime concerns overblown

BY SCOTT BLAKE
FLORIDA TODAY

MIAMI BEACH — Cruise executives on Tuesday defended the industry's safety and environmental records in the face of recent controversies.

A panel of executives — speaking to about 1,000 people during a "state of the industry" discussion at the annual

Seatrade Cruise Shipping Convention in Miami Beach — criticized news coverage of such issues as excessive, unfair and sensational.

"It's at least 10 times safer on a ship than on land," said Andy Stuart, chairman of the Cruise Lines International Association, a group that represents the cruise lines.

"That's hard to believe if

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Man's disappearance called a 'non-event'

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you've been watching the recent media coverage."

Carnival Cruise Lines President Robert Dickinson called the disappearance at sea of honeymooning cruise passenger George Smith IV "a non-event." Smith disappeared on a Royal Caribbean International ship in July during a cruise in the Mediterranean Sea.

Dickinson suggested the panel refrain from discussing the Smith case.

"I hate to see you talk about it because you're giving it legs," he said about the story. "It has nothing to do with safety on cruise ships."

Royal Caribbean International President Adam Goldstein said the industry has been giving travel agents "talking points" to emphasize ship security, if customers ask about the Smith case and other safety matters.

Goldstein also defended the industry's environmental record, saying the industry is undertaking a "global mapping project" to determine where its ships "should be discharging waste and where they should not be discharging waste."

He and other panel members also said the industry is investing "massively" in better wastewater-treatment systems — a movement that started several years ago, after federal authorities fined Carnival, Royal Caribbean and other cruise lines tens of millions of dollars for illegally discharging wastewater at sea and filing false records to mislead the Coast Guard.

"Why isn't anyone writing stories about how clean (the wastewater) is?" said Richard Sasso,

president and chief executive officer of MSC Cruises Inc. "We're using technology to purify water discharged into the ocean that you can drink."

Dickinson defended the controversial agreement between Carnival and the Federal Emergency Management Agency that paid Carnival \$236 million to provide three of its ships on the Gulf Coast to house emergency workers and others displaced by Hurricane Katrina last year.

"Had the ships not been there, the police and fire workers would have left town," Dickinson said. "FEMA has done a good job of winding this down and finding (other) accommodations" for the workers.

The deal became one of the most controversial contracts of the Katrina relief operation because of its excessive price.

According to reports, the ships were not close to being fully occupied, while U.S. Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., calculated the government's cost to house each person on the ships, assuming the vessels were fully occupied, was \$1,275 a week.

Norwegian Cruise Line President and Chief Executive Officer Colin Veitch also was critical of news coverage of the "rogue" wave that damaged a Norwegian ship in April off the coast of South Carolina.

"The press is a business that's looking to sell news," Veitch said.

The large wave that hit the Norwegian Dawn on its way back to New York during a cruise to Florida and the Bahamas flooded dozens of cabins, injured some passengers, and forced a stop for emergency repairs. ■

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Maritime lawyer reacts

Maritime attorney Tonya Meister has a different viewpoint than some cruise-line executives about the publicity surrounding incidents of crime on cruise ships.

"I think it's important for the media to report when crimes happen on cruise ships," said Meister, an attorney with the Miami-based law firm Lipcon, Margulies & Alsina. "It's important so that people can be aware of the issues, and keep themselves out of dangerous situations."

Ships have experienced 52 cases of people going overboard — 40 of them fatally — in the past decade, most of them during Caribbean and Bahamas cruises, such as those

that sail from Port Canaveral, according to a database compiled by Canadian professor and cruise critic Ross Klein.

A FLORIDA TODAY analysis of the data found:

■ Suicide, suspected suicide or attempted suicide was the leading known motive for people to jump overboard from cruise ships, accounting for 18 of the cases.

■ In 20 cases, the cause or motive remains unknown. Most of these passengers vanished while their ships were at sea, passengers reported.

■ There were two accidental deaths.

■ There was one known murder.

— Donna Balancia,
FLORIDA TODAY