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Oil rigs' safety net questioned as governments rely on private inspections

By David S. Hilzenrath
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To ensure that oil rigs, tankers and other commercial ships are in safe operating condition, governments around the world, including the U.S. government, often rely on inspections by private firms that are hired and paid by the vessels' owners.

But how much confidence should the world have in the maritime watchdogs?

The Deepwater Horizon catastrophe, which claimed 11 lives and fouled the Gulf of Mexico, has revealed that the mobile oil rig leased by BP had a host of maintenance problems.

Case in point: In April, the company that owned the rig gave parts of two cranes its worst rating, indicating that they did not work or should be removed from service.

That assessment was for the company's internal use.

Less than two months earlier, one of the main inspection firms upon which governments depend declared that the same cranes were in satisfactory condition.

Although there is no reason to think the cranes had anything to do with the explosion that destroyed the rig on April 20, records of the Deepwater Horizon's maintenance and inspection history -- including the crane assessments -- open a window on possible weaknesses in the little-known industry that oversees the world's commercial fleets.

The business traces its roots to the 1700s, when insurers in London created a system to assess the ships they might insure.

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Today, owners of vessels flagged in the United States generally have a choice. To fulfill federal requirements, they can let the Coast Guard conduct primary inspections, or they can enlist one of several private firms authorized to do the work in place of the Coast Guard.

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When it comes to vessels flagged by other nations -- such as the Deepwater Horizon, which is registered in the Marshall Islands - the Coast Guard depends largely on the oversight of foreign governments, which might essentially outsource the job to the same firms.

The fact that the inspection firms, known as "classification societies," are hired and paid by the vessels' owners appears to present "a built-in conflict," said Steve Gordon, a Houston maritime lawyer at the firm

Gordon, Elias & Seely. Its clients include eight surviving members of the Deepwater Horizon crew.

"It's almost like the fox watching the henhouse," said Lee Kincaid, a former shipping captain who has represented a labor union for marine engineers at the International Maritime Organization, an agency of the United Nations.

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