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As oil rig sinks, hope fades

Chances of rescuing the 11 missing workers diminish by the hour, Coast Guard says

By BRETT CLANTON and MONICA HATCHER
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1 2



In a photo the Chronicle obtained from an anonymous source, the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig sinks after the explosion Tuesday night.

Hope faded Thursday of finding 11 missing offshore workers alive as the sun set on a second day of searching and the massive drilling rig that exploded into flames late Tuesday night sank into the Gulf of Mexico.

With the fire doused and the rig submerged, the Coast Guard launched a sweeping effort to clean up petroleum spewed into the water and seal off a well at the sea floor that may have still been leaking oil.

As it did, investigations began and questions continued to swirl about the cause of the accident at the Deepwater Horizon, a half-billion-dollar rig owned and operated by Swiss-based Transocean that was under lease to BP.

And the attention of a nation $\frac{1}{2}$ even of the president himself $\frac{1}{2}$ focused on an oil rig in the Gulf that few would have ever known or cared about had it not been for a tragic accident there.

Coast Guard officials said search and rescue efforts for the missing would continue but acknowledged that chances of survival diminished by the hour.

Rear Adm. Mary Landry, commander of the 8th Coast Guard District, said the search was being conducted based on survivability models that take into account how long a person might survive in certain water temperatures and under current conditions. As of Thursday afternoon, the search had already extended beyond those estimates.

Interviews with evacuated crew members, who returned to shore by boat early Thursday, cast further doubt on the situation. They revealed that the 11 unaccounted-for workers were in the vicinity of the explosion, Landry said, suggesting they may have perished in the blast.

Stanley Murray, the father of one of the workers who escaped from the rig, said in an interview with the Houston Chronicle in Louisiana Thursday morning that his son told him he didn't think any of the missing could have survived.

$\frac{1}{2}$ The 11 that's missing, they won't find 'em, $\frac{1}{2}$ Murray said.

Adrian Rose, Transocean's vice president of quality, health, safety and environment, was more measured in a conference call with reporters.

$\frac{1}{2}$ Based upon reports from crew members we met as they came in last night, at the time of the incident, they believe (the missing workers) may have been aboard the rig and not able to evacuate, $\frac{1}{2}$ he said.

$\frac{1}{2}$ Very little panic'

Among the 126 aboard at the time of the explosion at 10 p.m. Tuesday, 115 were evacuated. Most were thought to have escaped by lifeboat, Rose said, recounting stories from survivors who said there $\frac{1}{2}$ was very little panic. $\frac{1}{2}$

Three people were critically injured among the 17 who were flown by air ambulance to hospitals in New Orleans and Mobile, Ala.

On Thursday, the hospitals would say only that three workers were still being treated, but their status was unclear, as was the number of other injured workers who may have been released.

The missing include nine Transocean employees and two from Houston's M-I SWACO, a drilling fluids provider, said

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officials with Transocean, which has large operations in Houston. Calls to M-I SWACO were not returned Thursday.

The family of one of the missing crew members filed a federal lawsuit Thursday in the Eastern District Court of Louisiana against Transocean and BP.

The family of Shane Roshto alleges negligence on the part of Transocean and BP, accusing the companies of failing to comply with federal regulations and statutes, as well as other things.

Another suit, also against Transocean and BP, was filed in Harris County later Thursday on behalf of Karl Kleppinger Jr., a Transocean deck hand. It also alleges negligence, claiming the companies failed to keep the vessel seaworthy.

Officials with BP and Transocean declined to comment on the suits.

Transocean's Deepwater Horizon is among an elite class of deepwater drilling rigs that have been in high demand in recent years as major Western oil companies, facing access limitations onshore, extend their search for oil and gas into more difficult regions.

The semi-submersible rig, held in place by giant thrusters, entered service in 2001, can operate in 10,000 feet of water and drill to a depth of 30,000 feet.

When the rig caught fire, BP had already finished drilling an 18,000-foot exploratory well at its Macondo prospect, located 41 miles offshore Louisiana, David Rainey, the company's vice president of Gulf of Mexico exploration, said Thursday.

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Production was near

The British oil giant had discovered an unspecified quantity of oil there and was taking the final steps to temporarily abandon the well so it could come back later and start production, he said.

The BP well contains commercial quantities of oil and was being prepped to tie in to BP's nearby Pompano platform, a person familiar with the plans said.

Those plans, however, could be on hold as the cleanup effort continues and officials try to get to the bottom of what happened.

Transocean is launching an internal investigation, Rose said. The Coast Guard deployed a robot submarine to take video of the sunken rig in an effort to piece together details of the accident and track potential leaks of diesel fuel and oil from the rig.

Even President Barack Obama was briefed Thursday afternoon in the Oval Office about the situation, the White House said.

Transocean's Rose had earlier speculated the explosion was caused by a blowout as the crew was cementing in pipe-like casing that secures the walls of the well, though he noted it was too early to say definitively.

A blowout occurs when the pressure of hydrocarbons in a reservoir exceeds the weight of drilling fluids put on top of it to hold it in place.

Blowout called unlikely

Ted Bourgoyne, professor emeritus in petroleum engineering at Louisiana State University, said it is uncommon for a blowout to happen in such a late stage.

Further, instruments on the rig should have warned of a spike in pressure and told workers to engage the huge blowout preventer that can seal the well at the sea floor.

"I think there was probably equipment failure involved," he said.

Scott Amann, a spokesman for Cameron, the Houston firm that built the blowout preventer used by the Deepwater Horizon, said it is too early to speculate on the cause of the accident but is speaking with BP and Transocean about the situation.

The Chronicle's Lindsay Wise contributed to this report.

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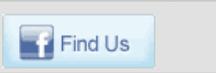


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