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Friday, August 20, 2010 As of 12:13 PM EDT

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Oil Spill Probe Focuses On Command Structure at Doomed Rig

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By Angel Gonzalez and Ben Casselman Of DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

HOUSTON (Dow Jones)--At the start of the fourth round of hearings in a federal investigation of the Deepwater Horizon Incident on Monday, investigators zeroed in on the command structure aboard the doomed rig.

U.S. Coast Guard Captain Hung Nguyen, co-chair of the Deepwater Horizon Joint Investigation, criticized the separation of navigation and drilling decisions aboard floating drilling rigs, a management structure commonly used throughout the oil industry.

Nguyen said that the master of the vessel, tasked with keeping a ship afloat, "should be the decision maker" and bear the ultimate responsibility. Generally drilling decisions, which can result in dangerous blowouts, are handled by offshore installation managers. The fact that ship captains don't have oversight over drilling "is one of the problems we have here," he said.

Daun Winslow, an executive with rig owner Transocean Ltd. (RIG) who was visiting the Deepwater Horizon at the time it exploded, said that "at the first explosion on the rig it became quite clear the master (of the vessel) was in charge."

However, Winslow acknowledged in testimony that he made or was consulted in key decisions on the scene even though he was a visitor, such as pouring water on the flaming rig or trying to disconnect the rig from the deepwater well--reflecting the chaotic nature of the incident that killed 11 and unleashed the worst accidental offshore oil spill in history.

The discussion comes as the U.S. government seeks to increase its regulatory oversight of offshore drilling. The investigation on the Deepwater Horizon incident, jointly conducted by the Coast Guard and the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement (BOEMRE), has mostly focused on what went wrong in drilling the well. But Monday's hearing focused on so-called "marine" issues--the functions that keep a rig afloat and in place above a well--and the command structure.

Steve Gordon, a veteran maritime attorney who represents the rig's chief mechanic, Doug Brown, has long argued that maritime issues--such as engine maintenance and chain-of-command--deserve more attention from investigators. A clearer command structure might not have prevented the blowout, he said, but it could have helped save at least some of the 11 workers who died. Gordon noted that the rig's captain, Curt Kuchta, testified in an earlier hearing that he hadn't been trained to disconnect the rig from the well in an emergency--the rig's last line of defense in the case of a blowout.

"When a captain of a vessel testifies that he does not have the authority or the knowledge to activate the final safety function of a vessel, there's a problem," Gordon said.

On Monday, investigators also discussed an audit prepared by BP PLC (BP, BP.LN), the oil company that leased the Deepwater Horizon, in September 2009. The audit, conducted by BP marine safety personnel, identified about 70 problems on board the rig, and led to a five-day shut-down of operations until some of those problems, mainly related to the integrity of the vessel's water tanks, were mitigated. Neil Cramond, head of BP's Gulf of Mexico marine authority, told investigators. The role of Cramond's unit was to make sure that the "marine-related items" had been fixed, and a follow-up visit in March confirmed that 63 of the 70 issues raised in the audit had been solved, he said.

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