New Zealand Charges Owner of Grounded Ship

NICK PERRY, Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — New Zealand authorities have filed charges against the owners of a cargo ship that ran aground on a reef six months ago, creating what authorities describe as the country's worst maritime environmental disaster.

Maritime New Zealand on Thursday charged Daina Shipping with discharging harmful substances from the vessel Rena. The charge carries a maximum fine of 600,000 New Zealand dollars ($489,000) plus another NZ$10,000 ($8,100) for each day the offense continues.

The Rena ran aground Oct. 5 on the Astrolabe reef near Tauranga, spilling 400 tons of fuel oil and killing at least 2,000 sea birds.

In January, the wreck split in two. Both halves remain on the reef — the bow section still perched above water, the stern section almost completely submerged.

Daina Shipping, incorporated in Liberia, is one of 80 subsidiaries of Greek shipping giant Costamare. Costamare reported 2011 profits of $88 million on revenues of $382 million.

Last month, a preliminary report by New Zealand's Transport Accident Investigation Commission found that when it crashed, the Rena was taking short cuts to try to reach port by a deadline.

The Rena's captain and navigating officer have pleaded guilty to mishandling the vessel and altering ship documents after the crash. The court has suppressed the names of the men, who are both Filipino. They are due to be sentenced in May.

New Zealand's government has estimated the cost of the cleanup at NZ$130 million ($108 million), most of which will be met by insurers. Salvage crews, who have removed more than 1,000 tons of oil from the ship and recovered about half of its 1,368 containers, plan to continue their work on the Rena once a storm in the area subsides.

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