Spain Acquits Accused In Tanker Disaster

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MADRID (AP) — A Spanish court on Wednesday acquitted all three people charged in the sinking of the Prestige oil tanker off Spain's northwestern coast 11 years ago, which triggered a major environmental catastrophe.

Judge Juan Luis Pia said the court found no criminal responsibility in the sinking and absolved the three defendants — the ship's Greek captain, his first officer and the former director general of Spain's Merchant Marine — of crimes against the environment. The captain was found guilty of disobeying authorities during the crisis, however.

The 26-year-old Prestige ran into problems during a storm Nov. 13, 2002. It was ordered out to sea and sank six days later. It spewed most of its 77,000 metric tons (20.5 million gallons or 77.6 million liters) of fuel oil in the region of Galicia, one of the world's richest fishing grounds.

The tanker's gooey, black toxic contents washed ashore and spread along the northern Spanish coast to southwestern France. Fishing was banned in much of Galicia for several months.

The court said the ship had been in poor condition and had a structural fault but pointed out that the vessel had all the necessary papers to sail. The court also determined that the government made the right decision at the time when it ordered the vessel towed out to sea, despite the criticism that followed, Pia said.

"Nobody knows with exactitude what might have been the cause of what happened, nor what would have been the appropriate response to the emergency situation

created by the Prestige's breakdown," the judge said in a nationally televised reading of the sentence from a court in A Coruna, the port city close to where the tanker sank.

The court found the captain, Apostolos Mangouras, 78, guilty of disobeying authorities during the crisis and sentenced him to nine months in prison. Because it is his first conviction in Spain and the sentence is less than two years, Mangouras will not have to go to jail.

Wednesday's verdicts came after nine months of hearings ended in July.

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