

Oil Rig Workers: BP 'Gambled' With Our Lives

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Two workers injured when an oil rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico told Congress that the companies in charge of the doomed drilling operation cut corners and neglected maintenance in a race toward higher profits.

Oil has been spewing since the Deepwater Horizon blew up off the coast of Louisiana April 20, killing 11 workers. More than 100 others escaped.

"They gambled with our lives," laborer Stephen Stone told the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee Thursday. He said the accident was "set in motion years ago by these companies needlessly rushing to make money faster, while cutting corners to save money."

The rig was owned by Transocean Ltd. and operated by oil giant BP PLC.

But the Transocean employee in charge of drilling said at a separate hearing near New Orleans that he never felt pressure to accelerate the pace at the expense of safety.

"Not at all," Jimmy Harrell, the rig's offshore installation manager, told a panel of Coast Guard and Minerals Management Service officials.

MMS official Jason Mathews, one of the panelists who questioned Harrell, noted that the project was several weeks behind schedule, a delay that had cost more than \$20 million at a daily rate of \$525,000.

"I'm sure at times people want to get it done and meet timelines, but (we) never jeopardize safety," Harrell responded.

Harrell also denied reports he engaged in a "heated debate" with a BP official on the day of the accident over a decision to displace drilling fluid with seawater in the rig's riser pipe. Seawater would have provided less weight to counteract the surging pressure from the ocean depths.

"There's a big difference between an argument and a disagreement," Harrell said. "Everything was sorted out, and the proper tests were being performed."

Harrell's assurances were at odds with testimony in Washington from Stone and Doug Brown, the rig's chief mechanic.

Brown, an Army veteran who suffered a broken leg and other injuries, told lawmakers the crew was often weeks or months behind on preventative maintenance because Transocean had cut the engine-room staff in half from the initial number of six workers in 2002.

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"Three people were left to do six people's jobs," he said. Workers complained but didn't get anywhere, he said. "They just kept telling us they would see what they could do," said Brown, who says he witnessed a dispute among managers on the day of the explosion.

Stone said the Deepwater operation showed signs of problems leading up to the accident as the well continued leaking mud that he and others were pumping into it. The operation plowed ahead even though workers on four occasions had to stop pumping mud and instead used a heavy sealant to try to stop the leaks — either because drilling too quickly caused cracks or because the underground formation was unstable, he said.

Keith Jones, whose 28-year-old son, rig engineer Gordon Jones, was killed in the accident, urged the lawmakers to rewrite the law's governing liability limits for such events. Jones, a Louisiana attorney, said current laws making the companies responsible only for economic damages, such as loss of income, are "offensive."

"No amount of money will ever compensate us for Gordon's loss. But reckless acts by employees of corporations performed to try to make the most money the fastest will never be deterred by the payment of mere compensatory damages," Jones said. "You must make certain they are exposed to pain in the only place they can feel it — their bank accounts."

Edward "Ned" Kohnke, a lawyer representing Transocean at the hearing outside New Orleans, expressed frustration that the panel has been grilling Transocean employees but isn't able to question at least one top BP worker who was aboard the rig.

Robert Kaluza, BP's well site leader on the Deepwater Horizon, was scheduled to testify but has exercised his Fifth Amendment right to not incriminate himself.

Kohnke also said BP has balked at sharing critical documents with Transocean, including well pressure data.

"What was going on down in the hole? They know that. We're not seeing what they know," Kohnke said. "I don't know that it's a stall tactic. I don't know what it is. All I know is that we want this information."

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