



Hon. Doris O. Matsui

Member of Congress

Doris O. Matsui

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Tuesday, March 27, 2007

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Congressional Hearing Requested by Congresswoman Matsui Exposes Cruise Industry's Lax Responses to Crimes Committed Onboard its Ships

Washington, DC – Congresswoman Doris O. Matsui (CA-05) questioned cruise industry representatives and took testimony from Sacramento resident Laurie Dishman today during a hearing on cruise ship crimes before the Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on the Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation. The Congresswoman requested the hearing after learning of how Ms. Dishman was sexually assaulted by a Royal Caribbean employee while on a cruise in February of 2006.

In her opening remarks, Congresswoman Matsui highlighted the dangerous and hazy legal status of cruise lines such as Royal Caribbean: "Cruises operate in a legal vacuum, where a lack of accountability empowers predators and obstructs their victims' pursuit of justice."

Continued Matsui: "This is an unacceptable situation, one made worse by the cruise lines' own efforts to avoid scrutiny of, and accountability for, their own handling of the security of their passengers."

During her appearance before the Subcommittee, Ms. Dishman recounted her disturbing and emotional struggle that stemmed from Royal Caribbean's refusal to investigate how she was raped by one of the company's "security guards." Ms. Dishman's assailant, in fact, had no security training at all. He was actually a janitor who was only performing security duties because Royal Caribbean did not have enough trained guards on board its ship.

In her opening remarks to the Subcommittee, Congresswoman Matsui focused on the cruise industry's historic pattern of delay and obfuscation in investigating allegations such as Ms. Dishman's. Said the Congresswoman: "There is no shortage of rape, sexual assault, alcohol-related abuse, or man-overboard cases on America's cruise lines. This is alarming in and of itself. However, what is even more troubling is that most of these incidents are never fully resolved or prosecuted.

"My hope for this hearing is that the cruise lines finally take these crimes seriously and enact necessary reforms to protect innocent people like Laurie Dishman."

Congresswoman Matsui's remarks before the Subcommittee, as prepared for delivery:

I would first like to thank Chairman Cummings for calling this important hearing. Mr. Chairman, I appreciate your willingness to bring this issue before this Subcommittee and to conduct a thorough and fair hearing of crime on cruise ships.

I asked Chairman Cummings to hold this hearing because a young woman from my district came to me for assistance after she had been a victim of a violent crime on a cruise ship.

That young woman, Laurie Dishman, is here with us today.

Laurie shared her shocking story with me in a letter one year ago.

As a passenger on board the *Vision of the Seas*, a ship operated by Royal Caribbean, Inc., Laurie was raped by a crew member. The story of her ordeal on the ship was shocking enough. Unfortunately, I soon learned that was only the beginning.

Laurie wrote me to tell me she was having difficulty getting a response to her request for information about the incident from the cruise line. As I began looking into the matter, a number of red flags were raised regarding the handling of Laurie's particular case.

Specifically, the FBI made a decision not to compel the alleged rapist to take a polygraph test. In addition, Royal Caribbean was withholding Laurie's own medical information from her.

These examples beg the question: What is the process when a crime is committed on a cruise line, and what recourse do passengers have?

The more I have inquired, the more I have been alarmed that there is no shortage of cases of rape, sexual assaults of minors, alcohol-related fighting and abuse, and persons overboard.

Even more troubling, most of these incidents have not been fully resolved or prosecuted. The onion, it seems, has only more layers to peel back.

Laurie's case was declined for prosecution under circumstances that strongly suggest federal authorities did not fully investigate her case. In addition, it appears that cruise industry representatives had coached the alleged rapist in his testimony.

I have since learned that there have been no convictions for rape cases on cruise lines in four decades. This is a statistic that takes on a new meaning through the lens of Laurie's experience.

Cruise industry executives testified last year before the House Government Reform Committee that 66 cases of sexual assault were reported from Royal Caribbean between 2003 and 2005.

However, as a result of a civil lawsuit, Royal Caribbean was forced to turn over internal documents that showed that these numbers were actually much higher. Specifically, such cases had actually occurred 273 times over the three-year period in question.

I have also come to learn that many of the crimes that were not reported involved minors. It seems impossible that Royal Caribbean would not consider these crimes worthy of reporting.

This time around, I want to know whether the industry has accurately depicted the number of sex crimes on ships. We also must be told how the industry chooses to define these crimes.

The cruise industry claims that they are the safest form of transportation. Some industry representatives have even said that cruises are safer than being onshore. I find such claims to be dubious at best, because they ignore a critical issue: on land, citizens benefit from the security offered by a police force, and there are laws on the books governing people's actions.

Not so on cruise lines. Americans who go on cruise ships for a family vacation have no idea they may be stepping into a situation in which United States law has little power, and where they may be victims of a crime without any opportunity for recourse.

Cruises operate in a legal vacuum, where a lack of accountability empowers predators and obstructs their victims' pursuit of justice. This is an unacceptable situation, one made worse by the cruise lines' own efforts to avoid scrutiny of, and accountability for, their own handling of the security of their passengers.

My hope for this hearing is that the cruise lines finally take these crimes seriously and enact necessary reforms.

I am certain that, after hearing from Laurie, you will come to the same conclusion I have: we must make sure something like this never happens again. I appreciate Laurie's determination and I am very proud to be by her side in this effort.

I am confident that, as a result of this hearing, we will have a better understanding of what actions we must take to ensure the safety and security of the more than ten million Americans who travel on cruise ships.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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