Ever Given: Six Days That Stopped World Trade

How a 400-Metre Ship, a Sandstorm and a Chain of Contested Decisions Blocked the Suez Canal and Triggered a $916 Million Claim

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Key Facts

Cost: Settlement reported ~$540M (unconfirmed); trade delay estimated up to $9.6B/day

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Executive Summary

On 23 March 2021 the 20,000-TEU container ship Ever Given ran aground in high winds in the single-lane southern reach of the Suez Canal, wedging diagonally across the waterway and closing it for six days. Lloyd's List estimated that roughly $9.6 billion of trade was delayed each day - an estimate, not a measured loss. The Suez Canal Authority initially demanded $916 million in compensation, later publicly reduced to $550 million; the confidential settlement of July 2021 was reported at around $540 million but never officially confirmed. Egypt's investigation blamed the master; the flag-state inquiry pointed instead to speed, wind and a fractured bridge-pilot relationship. This investigation examines the grounding, the remarkable salvage project that freed the ship, and what chokepoint dependence means for project risk.

Executive Lessons

- Triggers Are Not Root Causes

High winds grounded the Ever Given the way a match starts a fire - but the fire risk was built in. Vessel size, convoy policy, speed in the channel and escort rules were all human decisions made long before the sandstorm. Post-incident reviews that stop at the weather guarantee a repeat.

- Single Points of Failure Dominate Systemic Risk

Roughly 12 per cent of world trade passed through one single-lane channel section. The blockage's cost was not proportional to the ship's error; it was proportional to the world's dependence on one chokepoint. Map your own dependencies with the same honesty.

- Crisis Capability Must Pre-Exist the Crisis

The refloating succeeded because a specialist salvage industry, heavy tugs and dredging plant already existed and could be mobilised in hours. Organisations that plan to improvise emergency competence under pressure are planning to fail publicly.

- Investigator Independence Determines What You Learn

The SCA investigated an incident in which it was the largest claimant, and the settlement was confidential. Where the investigator has a financial interest in the conclusion, the organisation buys closure at the price of learning. Independent accident investigation is a governance asset, not a courtesy.

- Price Small Probabilities at Full Consequence

A grounding of this kind was a low-probability, civilisation-scale-consequence event. The shipping system had priced the convenience of minimal escorts and tight convoy spacing, but not the tail risk. Risk registers that rank by probability alone will always underfund the events that matter most.

- Let the Record Show the Estimate Is an Estimate

The '$9.6 billion a day' figure was a modelling estimate of delayed cargo value, repeated until it hardened into fact. In any failure review, label modelled numbers as modelled. Decisions made on laundered certainty are how organisations learn the wrong lesson loudly.

Timeline

- 2021-03-23: Ever Given grounds near kilometre 151 in high winds and a sandstorm, wedging diagonally across the single-lane southern reach and closing the canal in both directions.
- 2021-03-24: SCA suspends navigation; SMIT Salvage (Boskalis) is engaged by the owner and begins mobilising

specialist staff and equipment.
- 2021-03-25: Dredging and excavation begin around the bow; container lightering is held in reserve as a last resort that could add weeks.
- 2021-03-27: High-tide refloat attempts fail; two seagoing tugs, Alp Guard and Carlo Magno, join the operation; rock is reported under the bow.
- 2021-03-29: Ever Given refloated at 15:05 local time after ~30,000 cubic metres dredged and a 13-tug pull timed to the spring tide; navigation resumes that evening; 422 ships are waiting.
- 2021-03-31: Egyptian investigators begin their probe; the ship is held in the Great Bitter Lake for inspection as SCA chairman Rabie says the canal 'is not guilty'.
- 2021-04-01: Rabie tells Egyptian television that compensation for losses and damages 'will reach over $1 billion'.
- 2021-04-13: SCA formally demands $916 million covering salvage, lost revenue and reputational damage; an Egyptian court orders the ship arrested; general average is declared.
- 2021-05: SCA signals it will accept $550 million; owners and the UK P&I Club appeal the detention; court filings air apparent disagreements between SCA pilots and the control centre over the transit.
- 2021-06-23: Owner Shoei Kisen and insurers announce an agreement in principle with the SCA after weeks of negotiation.
- 2021-07-04: Formal settlement announced; SCA says the ship will be released on 7 July; terms are confidential, with a 75-tonne-pull tug confirmed as part of the package.
- 2021-07-07: Settlement signed in Ismailia; Ever Given sails after 106 days in Egyptian waters, later arriving in Rotterdam on 29 July.
- 2023-07: Panama Maritime Authority's flag-state investigation is reported: wind played a role, but pilots' Arabic-language orders sidelined the bridge team and the master attempted corrections - findings at odds with the SCA's captain-only narrative.

Sources

- Suez Canal reopens after stuck cargo ship is freed (Associated Press, 2021-03-29)
- Suez Canal unblocked: 'We pulled it off!' (Boskalis (official press release), 2021-03-29)
- Book published by Boskalis about the salvage of the Ever Given (cites Lloyd's List estimate of USD 400 million per hour) (Boskalis (official press release), 2021-12-08)
- Settlement agreed to release ship that blocked Suez Canal (Reuters (via Nippon.com), 2021-07-04)
- Deal Reached to Release Cargo Ship that Blocked Suez Canal (Reuters (via MarineLink), 2021-07-05)
- Language pilots sidelined bridge team during grounding of Ever Given (SWZ Maritime, 2023-07-13)