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The drive towards this new law was driven in part from a string of transport - related disasters in the late 1980s , such as the sinking of cross - Channel ferry the Herald of Free Enterprise in 1987 , the oil platform Piper Alpha disaster in 1988 , and the Marchioness Thames river boat collision in 1989 . More than 400 people lost their lives in these three disasters , but no one individual or organisation was brought to account .