

Officials arrested for shoddy construction

Youth centre fire in South Korea claims 23 lives

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Six local council officials have been taken into police custody in the wake of the fire in South Korea that tore through the Sealand Youth Training Centre last Wednesday. The police have also arrested and charged the centre's owner Park Jae Chon.

The fire, which claimed the lives of 19 kindergarten students and four adults, broke out just after midnight and rapidly engulfed the camp's dormitory building in which 430 children were sleeping. The camp was in Hwasong County in the Kyonggi Province about 80 kilometres from the capital Seoul.

The children, mostly from kindergartens in Seoul, Anyang, Puchon and from a primary school in Hwasong, were attending a two-day summer recreational program at the centre overlooking the West Sea. Most of those who perished were between five and seven years of age and either burnt to death or were overcome by noxious fumes.

The arrested Hwasong council officials and Park have been charged with violating construction laws and involuntary manslaughter. Last year the officials approved the youth centre as a structure built of reinforced concrete with a steel frame. In reality it consisted of 52 large containers covered with wood and corrugated iron that were stacked three storeys high on top of a single storey concrete structure.

The building was constructed of highly inflammable materials, including styrofoam ceilings, a material that is easily ignited and gives off toxic fumes when burning. There was no sprinkler system and most of the fire extinguishers did not work.

The dormitory block had only two narrow staircases as exits, making the rapid evacuation of large numbers of people all but impossible. Those who escaped the blaze claimed that they had not heard any alarm. According to police reports, council inspectors had given the centre a

safety clearance after carrying out two inspections this year. The access road leading to the site had been approved despite the fact that it was not wide enough for fire engines.

The fire reportedly broke out at 12.30am but the fire station in the neighboring town of Sosin was not notified until an hour later. When fire fighters did arrive around 2am, the building was already crumbling. The blaze was so intense that 50 fire engines battled for over three hours to bring it under control. Fire department officials said that the delay in notification was due the total lack of emergency training of the youth centre's staff. Some of the victims' bodies were burnt beyond recognition and identification will require the use of special genetic techniques.

Park Ja Chon, the youth centre's owner, has also been charged with bribing council officials to obtain the construction clearance. Park allegedly paid a council construction designer 14-million won in order to borrow his construction license.

He had been illegally operating the site as a youth centre for more than one year before obtaining approval and had continually ignored official directions to correct faults in the centre's electrical system. Police investigators believe that a short circuit in the system is the most likely cause of the fire.

The police have also arrested the head of the Somang Kindergarten in Seoul and another teacher claiming that they had neglected their duties and contributed to the disaster. The teachers who were assigned to sleep in Room 301 where most of the deaths occurred, were allegedly out of the building at the time of the fire having a drink.

The South Korean media are attempting to place some of the blame on the teachers. But the overriding cause of

the disaster was the hazardous character of the buildings, a fact that was not known to the teachers, the students or their parents.

Teachers and other survivors spoke of their ordeal this week. Kang Kwon Soo, the president of a kindergarten in Puchon who was at the centre with his students, said that as soon as the fire erupted, hundreds of people sleeping in the three floors ran toward the escape ways located on opposite sides of the building.

"But the hall ways were too narrow, dark and covered in smoke. This resulted in great chaos. Teachers and students scurrying to escape the inferno got entangled with each other and tumbled to the ground. Some were screaming in terror while others were crying in agonised pain. It was like hell on earth," he said.

Another teacher, Kim Tae Chul, who was sleeping on the third floor, awoke when someone shouted fire. "By then, the corridor and exits were already so filled with smoke that I could hardly see in the darkness."

Six-year-old Kang Yu Jong, who is still undergoing treatment for burns, said: "I woke up in the middle of the night because of the hot floor. I saw furniture burning in the corner and the room filled with smoke. A teacher helped me and other kids out of the room but four other children could not get out because the flames were too fierce. As soon as we got outside, burning windows fell to the ground from the second and third floors." Another eyewitness said that the third floor had collapsed shortly after the fire broke out, killing children who could have otherwise escaped.

The Sealand fire is the latest in a string of disasters that have occurred in the country over the past 10 years. These are not restricted to small operators such as Park but include major construction companies and corporations. Four years ago the Sampoong Department Store in Seoul collapsed killing more than 500 people, the worst peacetime disaster in South Korea's history. In 1994, the Songsu Bridge, also in Seoul, caved-in under the weight of rush hour traffic claiming the lives of 32 people.



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