

Inadequate safety planning produces South Korean subway disaster

Our correspondent in Seoul
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On the morning of February 18, a fire in the subway in the South Korean city of Daegu rapidly turned into one of the world's worst subway disasters. The official death toll currently stands at 133 but the figure could rapidly rise as 385 people are still missing. Another 145 were injured, some seriously.

Daegu is South Korea's third largest city, a major road and rail hub and centre for manufacturing and agricultural products. The majority of victims were young girls travelling to work at a nearby department store, which opened at 10.30 am. Others were old people travelling after the rush hour.

The fire was lit by Kim Dae-hwan, a 56-year-old man, who boarded the subway with a small vessel containing petrol and a cigarette lighter. According to press reports, his original intention was to commit suicide in public but changed his mind and decided to try to kill others because he "did not want to die alone".

Kim previously worked as a taxi driver until 2001 when he was partially paralysed by a stroke. Described as mentally unstable, Kim had previously threatened to commit suicide and told relatives that he wanted to torch the hospital where he was taken after his stroke because he was dissatisfied with his treatment.

Kim boarded the six-carriage train now known as subway 1079 some time after 9 am. After struggling to ignite his cigarette lighter he was warned by fellow passengers, some of whom physically attempted to stop him. But he partially ignited himself and some petrol on the floor of the train. By this time the train had reached Chungang-ro station and the doors opened.

Kim fled onto the platform with his back and legs alight but was saved by a man who used his jacket to extinguish the flames. He was later arrested at hospital and is currently in intensive care where he is being treated for burns to his back, hands and legs.

Even though Kim may have lit the fire, it is clear, even

from initial reports, that the South Korean government and rail authorities bear a direct responsibility for the large loss of life. What should have been a relatively minor incident rapidly escalated out of control because of the gross inadequacy of the safety systems and procedures in the subway.

Although the fire spread rapidly through the stationary train many passengers remained in other carriages unaware of the blaze or unable to open the train doors. Dense toxic fumes from vinyl and plastic seat cushions spread through the subway within minutes. The station's sprinkler system was triggered but it was not designed to suppress fire on the subway line and released water onto the platform and station passages.

A few minutes later a six-carriage train (subway 1080) travelling in the opposite direction arrived at the station and stopped alongside the blazing vehicle. The second train subsequently caught fire and was completely destroyed. Firefighters later found the train's passenger doors locked, with scores of passengers trapped inside.

Soon after the second train arrived, rail authorities, fearful that the overhead cables would collapse and cause electrocution, cut all power. The station was plunged into darkness with no emergency lighting, inadequate ventilation, and thick smoke preventing many passengers from escaping the blaze.

Most of those killed were in the second train, asphyxiated or poisoned by the toxic fumes even before the flames reached them. Many of the bodies were burned beyond recognition. It could take up to one month to identify all the victims.

Distressed families gathered near the station demanding that those responsible be brought to justice. Some had spoken with their loved ones on mobile phones moments before they died.

In an effort to placate rising public anger, President elect Roh Moo-hyun met with angry relatives at an

emergency headquarters and reception centre last week. “I have no body, please find it for me,” one middle aged woman screamed at Roh. Other relatives shouted at the president and grabbed his clothing before he was escorted away by security guards and police.

Roh has promised a wide-ranging inquiry and victims’ families will be compensated approximately \$US100,000, but the senior government and rail authorities—those ultimately accountable for this catastrophe—are not likely to be identified or punished. The media, police and government authorities have attempted to deflect attention onto the train drivers and other local rail employees—nine of whom have been questioned and could be charged.

The media has focused much of its attention on the driver of the second vehicle who left the train and took its master key that opens the doors to the train. He told police that he had opened the doors, then shut them again to prevent toxic fumes from entering the carriages. He said he switched the doors to manual before leaving the train.

Whatever the driver’s actions, the chaotic response of rail officials to the fire indicates a lack of planning and training for such a disaster. The driver was told to enter the station even though the first train was alight then left to deal with the crisis on his own. He appealed to rail controllers inside station: “It’s a mess. It’s stifling. Take some measures please. Should I evacuate the passengers? What should I do?”

South Korean subway trains are not equipped with smoke detectors or sprinkler systems. There was no emergency power or lighting in the station and the sprinkler system, which was completely inadequate for anything other than minor fires, seems to have been untested. Nor were there any emergency override mechanisms on carriage exit doors or windows.

A scathing report in the *Chosun Ilbo* on February 19 revealed that the safety standards in Daegu and Seoul subways are at 1970s levels. Daegu’s 29-station one-line subway system was built in 1997, a year before the introduction of national safety standards for subway train interiors. The vast majority of Korean subway trains are built from highly flammable and toxic materials. The newspaper revealed that Hanjin Heavy Industry, which constructs the carriages, uses fire retardant materials in those made for export but not in those for local use.

Chung Eul Kyo, 30, a construction engineer who has worked on the Daegu subway system and whose sister-in-law is among those missing, said, “I understand that non-flammable materials are much more expensive, and my guess is that they wanted to save money, this is a very

modern, attractive subway, but we would have preferred safety to looks.”

Like other state corporations, the national subways have been subject to cost-cutting and economic restructuring since the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis. As a result, rail guards have recently been eliminated on newer lines, forcing drivers to operate the doors and pay attention to what is happening inside their vehicles. Previously, an engineer was located in each end of the train.

Economic difficulties and rising social tensions also have played a role in Kim Dae-hwan’s decision to end his life. His stroke, the high cost of medical treatment and his inability to work all contributed to the pressures on Kim and his family. His wife is a low-paid worker at a garbage clearance factory in the city.

Harsh economic times, combined with virtually no state support for the unemployed, has produced high levels of depression and other mental illnesses. In Seoul there has been a spate of people attempting to commit suicide by jumping in front of trains. Ten people have killed themselves on just one section of the Seoul subway system since January. The media blamed the suicides on widespread depression, ignoring the worsening social conditions.

The government’s main response to the fire has been to deploy large numbers of police in subway stations across the country. Authorities declared they were concerned at the risk of “copy-cat” actions and terrorist attacks. It is a sure sign, however, that the government has no intention of addressing the lack of adequate safety procedures in the subway system let alone the broader social and economic issues underlying last week’s tragedy.



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