

# Hundreds still missing after South Korean ferry sinks

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The South Korean ferry, Sewol, sunk on Wednesday morning, about 20 kilometres off the island of Byungpoong, near the southern tip of the Korean peninsula. The vessel, which is operated by the Chonghaejin Marine Company, was carrying between 459 and 475 people, including 325 high school students aged 16 and 17.

The latest reports confirm six deaths—four students, one teacher and one ferry employee in her 20s—and 179 people rescued. Some 290 people are still missing, believed trapped inside the sunken vessel. Water temperature in the area is only 12 degrees C, low enough to cause death from hypothermia in less than two hours. “I’m afraid there’s little chance for those trapped inside still to be alive,” Cho Yang-Bok, a senior emergency official told YTN television.

The ferry was traveling from the north-western port of Incheon to the far south island of Jeju, a popular tourist resort known as South Korea’s Hawaii. The students onboard were from the Danwon High School in Ansan, a suburb of Seoul. Accompanied by 14 teachers, they were on a four-day school trip to Jeju. Only 71 of the more than 300 students are known to have been rescued.

The Sewol, which was operating well below its capacity of 900, was sailing in fair weather conditions with good visibility. Everything points to the ship having hit something. Many of the rescued reported a strong impact sometime before 9 a.m. on Wednesday, after which the ferry listed at a severe angle to the left, before flipping over completely and sinking two hours later.

All of the rescued were apparently saved between the arrival of the first rescue helicopter, sometime before 10 a.m., and the ferry’s sinking about an hour and a half later.

According to the *JoongAng Daily*, the crew informed the coast guard for 18 minutes. The crew is also reported to have issued repeated announcements urging passengers to stay calm and not prepare for evacuation. Only those close to the upper decks and on the elevated right side of the ferry were able to escape, many by jumping into the sea.

“There was a bang and then the ship suddenly tilted over,” the Yonhap News Agency quoted a 57-year-old survivor, as saying. “Downstairs were restaurants, shops and entertainment rooms, and those who were there are feared to have failed to escape.”

Cha Eun-ok, another survivor who had been on the deck of the ferry taking photographs, said, “It was fine. Then the ship went ‘boom’ and there was a noise of cargo falling. The on-board announcement told people to stay put ... [but the] people who stayed are trapped.”

“I wonder why the rescuers who first got to the ship didn’t do anything about those 100 or 200 I think were trapped inside the ship,” another survivor said. “They were just picking up those already on the top of the ship.”

Parents of the missing students have gathered in Jindo, the nearest town to where the ferry capsized. Prime Minister Chung Hong-won hurried to Jindo to meet the students’ families, but “faced a barrage of fierce protests from many families upset about a delay in rescue efforts,” the Yonhap News Agency reported. According to the Associated Press, Chung had “water thrown at him.”

Authorities initially reported that at about 1 p.m. on Wednesday authorities had rescued almost all the students, the rest of the passengers and the crew, only to back-track two hours later and blame the inaccurate information on overlapping reports.

The South Korean Navy and the Coast Guard have

formed a joint task force for the rescue efforts. These were scheduled to start at 5 p.m. on Wednesday but were delayed and reportedly began at around 6:30 p.m. According to Reuters, some of the missing students' parents are accusing officials of not making enough effort and even lying about the rescue.

“Since the government refused to take us to the scene 11 parents chipped in 61,000 won (\$58.79) each to hire a boat and took a reporter and a diver. But there was no rescue operation going on [Wednesday night],” said one father who declined to give his name. “I am extremely angry. The media is saying the rescue op is still going on. It’s all a lie,” he said.

Some news services have blamed the Chonghaejin Marine Company for changing the ferry’s route, allegedly to speed up its journey and make up for a delayed departure.

The ferry was under the command of a substitute captain, but the company claimed that this had no bearing on the accident. It stated that the captain was a veteran approved by Incheon Regional Maritime Affairs and Port Administration. Chonghaejin Marine, has yet to offer any explanation for the disaster.

This is the second accident involving the company in three weeks. On March 28, another Chonghaejin ferry hit a fishing boat in the West Sea from Incheon. The 396-tonne ferry was carrying about 140 passengers but no injuries were reported.

The sinking of the Sewol could prove to be the worst maritime disaster in Korea in more than two decades. In 1993, 292 passengers died when an overloaded ferry, sailed despite bad weather warnings and sank off the country’s west coast.



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