

Anger of victims' families mounts over South Korean ferry disaster

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The search for missing passengers aboard the capsized *Sewol* ferry continues in South Korea in one of the largest maritime disasters in the country's history. Anger at the government is building amongst family members, as well as the public in general, desperate for information about those still missing and for answers regarding the sinking.

The *Sewol* departed from Incheon Tuesday night after a two hour delay due to thick fog, headed for Jeju Island, a common vacation destination in Korea. Despite poor weather conditions, the company that owned the ferry, Chonghaejin Marine, demanded the crew set out.

The ferry was carrying 476 passengers, of whom 325 were 16- and 17-year-old students from Danwon High School in the working class city of Ansan, just south of Seoul. As of Sunday afternoon, fifty-two deaths have been confirmed with 256 still listed as missing. No survivors have been found in recent days, though 174 passengers were rescued.

The ferry began to sink off of Byeongpung Island on Wednesday morning. Its inexperienced third mate, Park Han-gyeol, was navigating the Maenggol Channel for the first time. The channel is known for its rough and unpredictable currents but is often used as a shortcut. The *Sewol* had deviated from the route suggested by the Ministry of Ocean and Fisheries and was following an approved alternate route submitted by the company to save time and money.

It is now believed that in the rough waters, a sudden sharp turn caused cargo in the vessel to come loose, after it had been poorly secured, throwing the ship off balance and causing it to sink.

Suspicions were further raised when it was revealed that the ferry company had underreported the weight of the cargo prior to departure. The Incheon Coast Guard

stated, "We are currently confirming what kind of cargo there was, how much it weighed, where it was placed, and how it was secured."

The families of the missing students have regularly criticized the government's efforts. Early Sunday morning, they staged a sit-in on the island of Jindo, where rescue operations are being conducted, demanding to talk with President Park Geun-hye. The sit-in resulted in clashes with police, as grieving family members shouted, "Save our children!"

A joint statement for the families was read on Friday, stating: "We are pleading for help to you, the people, as we are infuriated about the government's attitude." The statement continued, "There is no one explaining to us how the rescue operations are proceeding or directing us on what we should do. At this moment, our children could be screaming for help inside the ship."

Family members have also accused government statements of inflating the number of rescue workers participating in the rescue effort.

The vice-principal of Danwon High School, Gang Min-gyu, who survived the sinking of the *Sewol*, committed suicide early Friday morning. He left behind a note apologizing for the organization of the trip and asking that his body be cremated and his ashes spread at the site where many of his students died.

Serious accusations are being brought against the ferry's captain, Lee Jun-seok. Lee was not at the helm when the ship began to sink and was one of the first to leave the doomed vessel along with his crew. He has since been arrested along with two of his crew members.

Lee is to be charged with fleeing a ship and not providing aid under the Act on the Aggravated Punishment of Special Crimes. He could face life imprisonment.

Particularly, given the history of the company, moreover, there is every reason for suspicion that the drive to sacrifice safety for profits with the collusion of government regulators—by poorly securing cargo and using a dangerous alternate route—played a role in the tragedy.

Furthermore, the *Sewol* itself carried forty-six life boats, only one of which was in operating order, though the ship had passed its government safety inspection only a few weeks earlier in February. It seems likely that this influenced the crew’s decision to delay calls to abandon ship, once it became clear they were losing control of the vessel. Chonghaejin Marine has been involved in numerous other accidents in recent years. Three weeks before the *Sewol* sank, another passenger boat owned by the company was involved in a collision with a fishing boat in foggy conditions on the Yellow Sea. Going back to 2009, several incidents of engine failure on different ships resulted in hours-long delays at sea.

The Sewol sinking comes nearly 21 years after the sinking of the Seohae ferry, in which 292 people were killed, bearing striking similarities to the current disaster. Nothing has been done to improve safety in the intervening period.

The disaster has also been seized upon in an attempt to further the United States “pivot to Asia” under the auspices of providing aid. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe offered assistance in the form of the Japanese Self Defense Force, ordering the military to “make sure to give a swift response when Korea requests it.” To date, Korea has not accepted the offer.

Given Japan’s history of colonial repression in Korea, the suggestion of sending Japanese troops to Korea has the character of a provocation. It is well known that the major imperialist powers use such disasters in order to get the public used to overseas deployment of military forces and test out their operations.

After Typhoon Haiyan ripped through the Philippines, Japan sent 1,000 troops and three warships in one of the largest deployments of Japanese troops overseas since World War II.

Tetsuo Kotani, a maritime-security specialist at the Japan Institute of International Affairs, called Japan’s deployment of troops to the Philippines a “good opportunity to show off the military capabilities of

Japan and the US.” He compared the operation to war: “Command and control, rapid response, search and rescue. It’s basically the same as war, you just don’t fire guns.”



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