

South Korean government accused of inaction after ferry disaster

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It has now been one week since the sinking of the South Korean ferry, the Sewol. It departed from Incheon in poor weather, headed for Jeju Island, a popular vacation destination, and sank near the southern tip of the Korean peninsula with 476 passengers on board. Only 174 people were rescued.

As of last night, the confirmed death toll had risen above 120, while the search continued for the missing. Of those on board, 325 were students from Danwon High School in the working-class city of Ansan, just south of Seoul.

A mixture of the government's slow response and inaccurate information is fueling discontent among the relatives. The *Hankyoreh* quoted one parent, an Ansan factory worker, saying: "I sometimes think the reason the rescue effort has been so slow is because they look down on [Ansan] as an industrial park area."

Jeong Seok-jae, a pastor at an Ansan church attended by some students on board the Sewol, commented that many families, "felt not just grief over the loss of their children, but a sense of betrayal at the way the government responded."

In Ansan, parents and relatives of the victims gathered in front of the Ansan Office of Education yesterday to denounce the government. Jeong Dong-won, a father of a survivor stated: "What is the government doing right now? If appropriate initial response had been taken, the damage would not have been so great. How can [a nation's] disaster management system be so lax?"

Despite the fact that nearly 300 people were missing, only 20 divers were part of the initial rescue operation. It took two days for the number of rescuers to reach 500. The government also delayed bringing in equipment that would have aided rescuers in their search for the missing passengers.

Last Wednesday, families demanded that the government deploy fishing boats with lights designed for fishing at night, as well as a barge from which rescuers could better prepare for dives. This was not done until Saturday.

Family members became even more infuriated with the government's slow response when experts warned that passengers would have just 72 hours to be rescued if they had managed to find an air pocket in the sunken ship. Hopes were quickly dashed on Saturday when the first bodies from inside the Sewol were recovered. No survivors have been found since the day of the sinking.

Anger came to a head last Sunday as families demanded answers from the government. Grieving parents and relatives attempted several times to start a trip from Jindo, where the rescue operation is located, to Seoul to voice their complaints to South Korean President Park Geun-hye.

Each time family members tried to set out, police blocked them. At around 2 a.m. Sunday, approximately 300 people in Jindo attempted to board buses for the trip to Seoul. They were stopped by around 100 police officers, resulting in clashes. Prime Minister Chung Hong-won arrived on the scene, seeking to calm the situation with empty words about "considering every possible approach" to the rescue operation.

Family members again tried to set off for Seoul but were surrounded by police, who began filming the distraught marchers. Park Seong-ho, the mother of one victim, shouted at police: "All I want is to look into my baby's eyes one last time. All this time you say you've been doing a rescue effort, and we just can't believe that anymore."

The ferry captain, Lee Jun-seok, and six other crew members have been arrested. Lee has been criticized for delaying the evacuation of the Sewol. Transcripts

from the ferry's emergency call to the Jindo Vessel Traffic Service (Jindo VTS) show nearly half an hour passed from the time the Sewol began to sink before the evacuation began.

A first mate, surnamed Gang, who was arrested on Monday, made the call to the Jindo VTS, pleading repeatedly for rescue ships to arrive. He also stated that he and the other crew members, rather than assisting passengers, had gathered on the bridge and were soon unable to move. During the sinking, only one of the ferry's 46 lifeboats was operational, raising suspicions that this was why an immediate evacuation was not ordered.

The captain defended his action in not issuing an immediate evacuation order, telling CNN affiliate YTN: "It was a fairly fast current area and the water temperature was cold. I thought that abandoning ship without discretion would make you drift off a fairly far distance and cause a lot of trouble."

According to the *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, a student rescued from the ferry remarked: "They told us to stay put, with our life vests on. So for thirty minutes we just held on to the railings in the corridor without thinking about evacuating the ship. But then suddenly, the water started to pour in, and so we ran out. The situation was so urgent that I don't even remember how I was rescued."

In an attempt to divert attention from the government, President Park on Monday condemned the actions of the crew as "akin to murder." She foreshadowed an inquiry, saying: "All procedures should be closely investigated ranging from the purchase of the Sewol to license acquirement, refurbishment, safety checks and navigation permits. Every irregularity should be uncovered."

The cause of the sinking is not yet clear, but prosecutors have blamed the captain and the third mate for making a sharp turn. "Mr Lee is charged with causing the Sewol ship to sink by failing to slow down while sailing the narrow route and making [a] turn excessively," a prosecutor told the Yonhap news agency. The third mate denied making a sharp turn.

Chonghaejin Marine, the company that owned the Sewol, is now under investigation. South Korean prosecutors have placed travel bans on 30 Chonghaejin officials, including the owner Yoo Byung-eun and his two sons. Charges against Yoo include dereliction of

duty, embezzlement, tax evasion and bribery, related to lobbying during approval of sea routes and safety checks.

The Korea Coast Guard, Maritime Affairs and Port Administration, and Korean Register of Shipping conducted an inspection in February of the Ohamana, a ferry similar to the Sewol, and despite finding five violations, including malfunctioning fire doors, permitted it to continue operating. The Sewol also passed a safety check in February.



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