

South Korean subway collision leaves 238 injured

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A subway crash in Seoul, South Korea on Friday caused hundreds of injuries and the shutdown of the subway line. A mechanical failure led to the collision of two trains, one of which was stopped at a station. Many people have quickly drawn a connection with the sinking of the Sewol ferry nearly three weeks ago that killed 302 people, mostly high school students.

The accident occurred on Seoul's line 2, the busiest in the capital with 752 million passengers annually, according to the most recent numbers from 2012. A train stopped at Sangwangsimni Station in the northern part of the city was rear-ended by another train. The station's Automatic Train Stopping (ATS) system failed to warn the driver of the oncoming train that the first was still stopped at the station. No fatalities were reported but 238 people were injured. Dozens remain hospitalized, including one of the two drivers who required surgery for a fractured shoulder.

The company operating the subway is Seoul Metro, a public corporation that runs subway lines 1–4. The national government is pushing for the privatization of public corporations like Seoul Metro while seeking cut costs. This has led to dangerous practices such as the use of aging equipment that has passed its original recommended period of use.

Both trains in the crash had been in operation for almost 25 years. The train that was stopped at the station, number 2258, and the train that struck it, 2260, were constructed in 1991 and 1990 respectively. In the early 1990s, the period of use for subway trains under the Railway Safety Act was extended from 15 years to 20 years, and then to 25 years. In 2009 it was lengthened again to 40 years. Last March, however, the period of use was abolished so long as the trains passed a safety inspection which is no guarantee of their actual condition.

Amid the public uproar over safety standards after the Sewol sinking, Seoul Metro carried out a safety inspection of its equipment but turned up nothing.

A Seoul Subway Union official stated, "Due to the increased period of use, concerns over safety have been growing. Especially with the 2260 train which caused the accident, the emergency braking equipment was not functioning properly and the train operators were very worried."

The Seoul Subway Union, however, has backed the government's privatization plans, which will only increase the cost-cutting measures. Last December, the Korea Railway Workers Union (KRWU) went on strike for 22 days supposedly to oppose the government's plans. But the Seoul Subway Union reached an agreement with the government to call off a strike in support of the railway workers. The KRWU subsequently sold out their strike.

Both unions are members of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) which masquerades as a militant organization but subordinates workers to the opposition Democrats, who are not opponents of privatization. In fact, the push for privatization began under the presidency of Kim Dae-jung as part of the implementation of the IMF's demands for drastic restructuring in the wake of the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis. The plans were continued under Democrat President Roh Moo-hyun.

The Democrat Party recently formed an electoral agreement, known as the New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD), with former presidential candidate and multi-millionaire Ahn Cheol-soo. He is the former head of Ahn Labs, a producer of anti-virus software. Ahn postures as a government outsider and is popular particularly among young people fed up with the current state of politics. The Democrats are hoping

to capitalize on Ahn's popularity.

The opposition is also seeking to exploit public anger over the sinking of the Sewol, which has only been compounded by last Friday's subway accident.

Families are blaming the deaths of their children and other family members on the government for the slow and careless manner of its rescue operation. They are also critical that the ferry owner, Chonghaejin Marine, was allowed to continue operating despite numerous safety violations and other allegedly illegal practices.

While the media is suppressing negative reports, public outrage is growing. On May Day, families of the victims held another march on Jindo, the island on which the initial rescue operation was based, to denounce the government. There are still 58 people missing.

Memorials to the victims in various cities have become protest sites prompting the government to try to ban such displays. One person, surnamed Kim, commented at a memorial in Busan, "If the government intends to stop the atmosphere of mourning for the victims of the Sewol from spreading, that's absurd. If the government has nothing to hide, it shouldn't stop people from voluntarily setting up memorial altars."

Young people in particular are using the memorials to voice their outrage with the government and the greed of companies. A middle-school student left the message, "Our society is one where people only look out for themselves. Because of adults' greed, these students' lives were lost in the blink of an eye." Another read, "The government keeps telling lies. They just say that they are rescuing the students, but it doesn't seem like they are doing anything."

The opposition NPAD and allies like the KCTU are seeking to direct public anger solely against President Park Geun-hye in an effort to boost its votes in the upcoming June 4 regional elections. Ahn Cheol-soo criticized Park for showing indifference to the suffering of those who lost family members, declaring that "there should be repentance and an apology on the part of the president."

Both the government and the opposition, however, defend the profit system that is ultimately responsible for sacrificing safety standards, along with jobs, working conditions and living standards, to the demands for private profit.



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