

Fire in South Korean nursing home kills 21

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A fire broke out at a nursing home shortly after midnight on Wednesday morning in the South Korean city of Jangseong, located in South Jeolla Province. Twenty-one people were killed, mostly elderly patients in their 70s and 80s as well as one nurse who was on duty at the time. Another eight were injured with some still in critical condition. The hospital primarily cares for patients suffering from Alzheimer's and similar ailments.

Later on Wednesday, police arrested an 81-year-old man, identified only by his surname Kim, who had been taken to a nearby hospital and treated for smoke inhalation. Kim, who suffers from dementia, was reportedly caught on surveillance camera setting a fire in a second floor utility room of the Hyosarang Care Hospital.

It appears that this patient is to be made the scapegoat for woefully inadequate working and safety standards in South Korea's private nursing homes. A police officer stated, "Even though Kim is suffering from Alzheimer's, he is able to communicate in a logical manner. We are questioning him about his motives."

While 10 patients on the first floor were able to escape the blaze, most of the 35 on the second floor were trapped. Some patients had been restrained to their beds as a result of their health conditions, an illegal practice that the privately-run hospital denies. A *Hankyoreh* report on nursing homes last year recorded similar practices at a nursing home located outside of Seoul.

The nurse was killed as she tried to put out the flames with a fire extinguisher. She was the only one on duty during the night shift.

As well as having an inadequate number of staff, the facility lacked basic fire prevention systems such as sprinklers. Under South Korean law, nursing homes under 1,000 square meters are not required to install such devices. Many operate with hardly any oversight

of their operations. The Hyosarang hospital had recently passed a safety inspection.

The hospital's director Lee Hyung-seok told reporters after the fire, "I've committed a grave sin. There is no excuse when valuable lives were sacrificed." However, the practices that took place at Lee's hospital are hardly out of the ordinary in the quest for greater profits.

After the government established the elderly long-term care insurance system in 2008, the number of nursing homes in South Korea doubled to 1,284 as of April. Many look after residents who need a great deal of care, but have insufficient resources to do so. This leads to the abuse of both the elderly patients and the employees struggling to take care of them.

A similar tragedy occurred in 2010 when 10 elderly women were killed in a nursing home fire in the city of Pohang in North Gyeongsang Province. The Indeok Nursing Home where the fire occurred also lacked fire alarms and a sprinkler system.

Treatment for those with mental health issues, ranging from dementia to severe stress caused by work or school is very limited in Korea. One in ten Koreans over the age of 65 suffer from Alzheimer's but many lack the funds to access adequate care.

The lack of proper care has led to an increase in suicide among the elderly. The South Korean rate is the highest in the world, with 80 per 100,000 people over the age of 65 choosing to end their lives. The number jumps to 160 for those over 75. From 2000 to 2010, the number of elderly people committing suicide shot up from 1,161 to 4,378.

For many of South Korea's elderly, their health problems stem from their early years when South Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world. Most of today's elderly were born into a largely agricultural society that has changed vastly as the country has industrialized.

Kim Yeon-myung, a social welfare professor at Chung-Ang University, was quoted in the *Financial Times* saying, “People in their 70s today were born into an agricultural society and had no concept of preparing for their old age. They just thought their children would support them.”

As a result, many elderly people are forced to continue working well past their retirement age. As of 2011, South Korea led other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries with the proportion of people aged between 65 and 69 who are still working. The elderly poverty rate in South Korea is also the highest in the OECD standing at 50 percent, according to a government report released at the end of last year, up from 46 percent in 2006.

The fire has provided a glimpse into the brutal reality of South Korean capitalism. While touted as a success story of the capitalist market, South Korea remains mired in the economic backwardness of its past. The gulf between rich and poor is widening in a country with very limited social services.

Families often have difficulty caring for elderly grandparents. Half of all salaried workers in South Korea earn less than 2 million won (\$US2,000) a month, struggling to support their own children in a country where high education costs dominate a family’s budget. Many people are simply unable to care for their aging parents and are forced to turn to nursing homes.

During her campaign in 2012, President Park Geun-hye promised to institute an elderly pension system providing the sum of 200,000 won (\$US200) to everyone over 65. This pittance would not even cover rent for a cheap apartment, let alone food and other bills. Even so, the pension plan has been scaled back with some elderly people expected to only receive 100,000 won (\$US100). The pension system will take effect this July.

The nursing home fire came two days after a fire at a bus terminal in Gyeonggi Province’s Goyang City, which killed seven people and injured 41 others. The fire and smoke spread throughout the terminal in a short time, largely because doors designed to contain a fire failed to work properly.

Connections between the fire at Hyosarang, as well as at the Goyang bus terminal, and the sinking of the

Sewol ferry in April that killed 304 people are quickly being drawn. Lax safety standards are the norm across the board as business owners seek to generate more money. Despite promises from both major political parties to improve safety, the government and opposition both put private profit ahead of the lives and well-being of ordinary working people



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