

Over 150 dead in Halloween disaster in South Korea

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A crowd crush of people in Seoul, South Korea has left at least 154 people dead and another 149 people injured. The tragedy took place Saturday night as people, mostly in their late teens and 20s, gathered for Halloween parties in the city's Itaewon district, known for its nightlife. It is the single largest loss of life in the country since the Sewol Ferry sinking in 2014.

The disaster took place in an alleyway off Itaewon's main road near the Hamilton Hotel, located by the district's subway station. The alley is only about 3.2 meters across, and was unable to handle the large numbers of people gathered there. Many of the side streets and alleys in Itaewon are similarly narrow, in addition to being very hilly, leading to over-crowding even on a normal Saturday night.

Authorities have announced an investigation into the exact cause and whether businesses where the tragedy occurred had followed safety regulations. Despite no clear evidence, the corporate media is already trying to blame the victims themselves. Some have suggested that people rushed to catch a glimpse of a celebrity rumoured to be making an appearance, or even the unlikely possibility that masses of people were under the influence of drugs, in a country where illegal drug use is uncommon.

A man in his 20s injured in the disaster, identified only by his family name Kim, told the media, "People started pushing around 10:30 p.m. and then from around 10:40 people fell over one-by-one and were piled 5 or 6 bodies high."

A woman in her 20s stated that she and a friend "were going to the subway station, but there were so many people, we couldn't move. We were pushed back and forth repeatedly and then, as people suddenly pushed us, my friend was knocked to the ground."

People accused nearby stores and bars of refusing to

allow people inside as they attempted to escape the crowds. One witness stated, "Bars in Itaewon put tables in the street and people coming and going were tangled up in the more cramped spaces. People collapsed and tried to escape into nearby stores, but they were thrown out into the street and told that it was closing time, and more casualties occurred."

Whatever the exact cause, basic safety measures were clearly not in place to deal with the large influx of people for the Halloween festivities in Itaewon. The district is popular with both young Koreans and foreigners living in South Korea, and is a traditional gathering spot during holidays and events. Among the identified victims were at least 26 foreigners from 14 countries, including from China, Japan, Russia, the United States, France, Uzbekistan, Iran, Australia, and Norway.

The large crowds Saturday night were predictable, especially as the right-wing Yoon Suk-yeol government has misled people into believing the COVID-19 pandemic is over and removed nearly all virus mitigation measures. It was one of the largest public gatherings since the pandemic began and is indicative of the official approach to public safety, with tens of thousands in confined spaces without masks or other precautions, all in the pursuit of profits.

On average each day, 35,000 people continue to be infected with the deadly and debilitating virus while two dozen die, according to official numbers. The complete removal of pandemic safety measures goes hand-in-hand with the disregard for public safety in other aspects of life.

On Sunday, Yoon stated the tragedy "should never have happened," saying, "As president responsible for the lives and safety of the people, my heart is heavy and it is difficult to contain my sorrow." He announced,

“The government will establish a period of national mourning until the handling of the accident is complete. It will place the highest national priority on managing the accident and on follow up measures.”

However, all of this is the pro forma official response to such tragedies. Whatever the government’s investigation finds, responsibility for the tragedy will be swept under the rug and none of the root causes of the disaster will be addressed. Anyone held liable will merely be used as a scapegoat. There will be no serious efforts to put crowd control and other measures in place for future events, despite the responsibility of local officials to ensure public safety.

Furthermore, while the main opposition Democratic Party of Korea and its allies will almost certainly seize on this tragedy to paint President Yoon as “incompetent” in order to further their electoral ambitions. However, Saturday’s disaster is ultimately the result of the profit system, which both the Democrats and ruling People Power Party defend.

South Korea’s entire ruling class has a long history of ignoring safety for profits. This has led to numerous tragedies, including the Sampoong Department Store collapse in 1995, which killed 502 people; the Sewol Ferry sinking in 2014, which killed 304 people, mostly high school students; and an April 2020 fire at an Icheon construction site that killed 39 irregular and subcontract workers.

Similar incidents have taken place in other parts of the world in recent years, including last November at the Astroworld musical festival in Texas, United States, in which ten people were killed in a crowd crush. Following that tragedy, Keith Still, a professor at the University of Suffolk, specializing in the applications of crowd safety and crowd risk analysis, explained in an NPR interview, “Once you’re in a high-density surge environment, there’s very little you can do as an individual. It is up to things like the building design or the operations manager or the safety design of any system to make sure they’ve got a safe environment.”

In the case of the disaster in Itaewon, it is clear that local authorities did not take the proper precautions to ensure that the crowds could move safely in the environment. This latest tragedy shows again that the capitalist class in South Korea, as with its counterparts internationally, is incapable of addressing the basic needs of the broad masses of people.



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