

Sewol Ferry Disaster in South Korea

FACT SHEET

On April 16, 2014, the Sewol passenger ferry carrying 476 people capsized and sank in what is now referred to as the deadliest maritime disaster in South Korea. In total, 294 passengers were killed, including 245 students (Grade 11) who were on a field trip from Danwon High School. Still missing are 9 passengers—including 4 students, 2 teachers, and 3 others including a father and his six-year-old. In spite of the international outrage, there has not yet been a comprehensive investigation on what caused the Sewol to sink, why the passengers were not promptly rescued, and why the sunken ship has still not been salvaged.

Why did the Sewol ferry capsize?

The ferry should have been deemed unsafe to begin with. It had been retired after 18 years of service, but was purchased by Chonghaejin Marine Co. Ltd. after deregulations allowed for its extended use. The ferry then underwent an illegal redesign to carry more passengers and cargo than it should have been allowed to, and in ways that ultimately affected the ferry's load balance. There is a lot of speculation as to why exactly the Sewol capsized the way it did, and many troubling questions remain unanswered.

Why didn't the passengers escape instead of waiting passively for rescue?

Survivors reported receiving repeated instructions over the loudspeaker to remain still in their cabins. Sewol's Captain Lee Joon-Seok, who was among the first to jump to safety, later explained that he was confused about evacuation protocols and that he thought the cold ocean waters were unsafe without rescue boats present. Shockingly, the ship's captain and crew in command were first to abandon the ship, after repeatedly telling the passengers to stay put. As a result, the majority of passengers remained in their cabin expecting rescue as the ship sank. To escape from a sloped, sinking ship is an extremely challenging feat in itself, and the floatation life vests that the passengers were wearing made swimming impossible once the ship was submerged.

Who was held accountable for the Sewol sinking?

Sewol's Captain Lee was sentenced to 36 years in prison for gross negligence, and crew members have received sentences that vary from 5 to 20 years on charges ranging from criminal negligence to accidental homicide. However, many critics do not believe the crew was solely responsible for the incident. In fact, many of them were victims as well, and some crew lost their lives while trying to save others. All the crew, including the captain, received very little safety training, yet bore the brunt of the punishment. Sewol's Captain Lee was a 69-year-old temporary hire with little knowledge or authority over the ship. More than half of the crew, including the captain, were temporary workers with contracts of 6 months to a year.

The owner of the ferry, billionaire and controversial religious leader Yoo Byung-Eun, eluded a nationwide manhunt for several weeks. The police later reported that Yoo's body was found in a field, wearing a winter sweater—in sweltering June—and was too badly decomposed for conclusive DNA testing. The bizarre circumstances surrounding his death have sparked even more rumours about a possible cover-up.

What is the "golden time" and why is it significant?

The "golden time" is the grace period during which the passengers could have been saved. During this time, many passengers left heart wrenching video recordings and notes for their family—some sending

hopeful reassurance, thinking that they would soon be rescued, and some bidding farewell once they realized that no help was coming. Although the navy and the coast guard were on the scene, they did not engage in active rescue and instead wasted time waiting for a private salvage company. There was a great deal of confusion, failure in inter-agency communication and coordination, public misinformation, and ultimately, unclear systems of accountability. Simulations later showed that if appropriate measures were taken, all passengers of Sewol could have been rescued within six minutes and seventeen seconds.

How does the Sewol sinking relate to broader contexts of neoliberalism?

Over the past few decades, the South Korean state had given more and more power to business interests. Safety and rescue work that should have been done by public agencies had been deregulated and privatized. The Sewol disaster took place at the intersection between the neoliberal state that reneged on its responsibility to safeguard people's lives and the private corporations that sacrificed people's safety for increased profit. Privatization, deregulation, and neoliberalism are all implicated in this tragic disaster.

What have the families of Sewol victims done since the tragedy?

The bereaved families of Sewol have become important critical voices in movements for democracy in Korea. They have transformed unfathomable grief into a powerful basis for political community, and they have organized protest rallies and symbolic pilgrimages, hunger strikes and occupations of public space to raise awareness and demand justice. They have engaged in continued legislative and media activism to fight against growing apathy and the rush to forget. The yellow ribbons symbolize both mourning and remembrance, and a commitment to social change.

The public outcry is not limited to South Korea. In an unprecedented show of collective outrage and condolence, nearly 1,100 international scholars had signed a petition of concern immediately following the Sewol tragedy, with a large number of signatories coming from the University of Toronto and York University community. In Toronto and many other cities throughout the world, there is a dedicated transnational grassroots network of people participating in collective grief and outrage, and community organizing. The Toronto People in Solidarity with the Families of Sewol Ferry have been leading a "relay" solidarity hunger strike since August 2014, and March 20, 2015 marks Day 215.

Sewol families traveled to more than fifteen major cities throughout North America in March 2015 to share their stories and experiences. They ask us to remember their pain, and they urge everyone not to look away from injustice, to uncover the whole truth, and to work towards building a world in which such senseless tragedy will not be repeated.

Sources

Jae-Jung Suh. "The failure of the South Korean national security state: the Sewol tragedy in the age of neoliberalism." *The Asia-Pacific Journal* Vol. 12, Issue 40, No. 1. October 6, 2014. goo.gl/DsO1kI

"Experts say Sewol ferry could have been evacuated in several minutes if only order had been given." www.sewoltruth.com

"The Sewol Ferry Tragedy as a Warning: Neoliberal Deregulation and Lack of Democratic Accountability in South Korea." A Statement by Scholars Concerned about the Sewol Tragedy. May 7, 2014. sewolscholars.weebly.com

Christine Hong, "The Sewol on Our Shores." *Foreign Policy in Focus*. May 21, 2014. fpif.org/sewol-shores/

Jenny Choi, "Seeing Yellow: The Aftermath of the Sewol and its Political Implications," *The Three Wise Monkeys*. May 19, 2014. goo.gl/xmb0mZ

This fact sheet was researched and written by Yasna Kharadi, Aryel Maharaj, and Ju Hui Judy Han.