

# South Korea's deadliest fire in a decade leaves 29 dead

By Ben McGrath  
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A large fire at a fitness center in Jecheon, South Korea last Thursday left 29 people dead and close to three dozen injured. The eight-storey building housed a gym, public sauna and restaurants. The fire was the deadliest in South Korea since 2008, when 40 people died in a warehouse fire in Icheon, Gyeonggi Province. Jecheon is a small city located in North Chungcheong Province, 168 kilometers southeast of Seoul.

The fire began in the ceiling of the first floor parking garage, which was undergoing maintenance work. Within seven minutes, the entire building was engulfed in flames, fueled by highly flammable cladding on the structure's exterior. Authorities revealed that the sprinkler system had been shut off and the emergency exit in the women's sauna on the second floor was blocked by storage shelves.

Of the people killed, 20 were found in the women's sauna, which had only one remaining exit. A witness told *Kyunghyang Shinmun*: "The bathhouse entrance is narrow, and it's difficult for two to three people to enter at the same time. The people would not have been able to see because of the smoke, so it wouldn't have been easy for them to find the exit."

Saunas in South Korea are typically inexpensive and ubiquitous throughout the country. The cheap, highly flammable cladding on the building is commonly used by construction companies to cut costs. On top of burning quickly, it also releases a toxic gas that likely contributed to the deaths.

Comparisons were immediately drawn to a January 2015 fire at an apartment building in Uijeongbu, Gyeonggi Province, which killed four and injured 124. That structure similarly had been covered in flammable cladding. The latest blaze also calls to mind the Grenfell Tower tragedy in London, England that left at least 71 dead.

Kong Ha-sung, a professor in the Department of Fire Safety at Kyungil University, told the *Korea Herald*: "So many more buildings have already been wrapped by the flammable cladding, so the government should come up with solutions to ensure fire safety."

However, little or nothing will be done to improve fire and safety regulations, which are often weakly enforced, allowing landlords to skirt around them in order to boost profits. A law was passed in 2015 banning construction companies from using flammable cladding on buildings six storeys or more, but did not require the removal of these materials on existing structures.

Constructed in 2012, the Jecheon fitness center had been purchased by a new owner over the summer, renovated and then reopened in October, giving ample time and opportunity to remove the dangerous material from the building's exterior.

Survivors and family members of those killed have criticized the firefighters for being slow to bring in ladders and break windows to rescue people trapped in the fitness center. The fire, however, revealed the large gap in firefighting capability between large cities like Seoul and small-to-medium sized cities like Jecheon.

According to the *Hankyoreh* newspaper, Jecheon is able to immediately mobilize just half the rescue workers and three quarters the number of vehicles of the average fire station in Seoul. Even given the population differences, it is clear Jecheon's fire station, as well as others throughout the country, are undermanned, an effect of government cost-cutting. Throughout North Chungcheong Province, only 70 rescue personnel were recruited in the second half of 2017 despite the stated official intention to hire 90.

President Moon Jae-in made a publicity appearance in Jecheon on Friday to deflect anger from the

government. He instructed rescue workers to “make utmost efforts for speedy rescue and firefighting operations.” This is an empty and meaningless expression often utilized by officials around the world to give the appearance of leadership at a time of crisis.

In the same vein, authorities issued arrest warrants Tuesday for the building owner and its manager. The two men, identified only by their family names Lee and Kim respectively, were first detained on Sunday. The owner will be charged with manslaughter by professional negligence and violation of the fire code. The manager will only face the manslaughter charge. The government hopes to make scapegoats on these two and sweep the common practice of ignoring safety regulations under the rug.

Manslaughter by negligence conviction carries a sentence of up to five years in prison and maximum 20 million won (\$18,500) fine. Violation of the fire code comes with a maximum 10-year prison term and up to 100 million won (\$92,900) in fines. For the wealthy, these fines are little more than slaps on the wrist.

Authorities stated last week: “The cause of the accident and issue of responsibility will be available after the investigation is over. We are putting all of our efforts into supporting those who have lost their relatives due to the fire, for example, we are first going to provide administrative support for them to go through funeral procedures.”

In other words, the government’s failure to enforce regulations and halt the use of deadly construction material will not be genuinely addressed. Any information that does come out of any inquiry will be delayed until after anger has died down and designed to deflect blame.

Disasters leading to major losses of life are all too frequent in South Korea, where companies regularly cut corners to save money and then receive minimal punishment, if any, when a catastrophe does occur. Such tragedies, however, are increasingly provoking widespread resentment and opposition. Anger over the Sewol ferry sinking in 2014 that killed 304 people, mostly high school students, contributed to massive protests against the previous administration of President Park Geun-hye in late 2016 and early 2017.

Moon’s government is conscious of this public hostility, compounded by deteriorating social conditions for working people. However, the

government, which defends the profit system, has nothing to offer except crocodile tears.

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