

Building a safer future

The *Sewol* disaster has brought home to South Koreans that saving lives should involve no compromises, reports **Moyoun Jin**

For South Korea, the *Sewol* disaster has been a bitter reminder that safety must always come first. Its loss was the country's worst maritime accident in decades. Of 476 passengers and crew, 304 were left dead or missing after the 6,586gt ferry capsized during a routine journey between Incheon and Jeju.

Only 75 of 325 students from Danwon High School, who were travelling on *Sewol* with 15 of their teachers, survived the accident.

As a result of the tragedy, safety training is now at the forefront in South Korea. The trial of the *Sewol*'s 15 crew members for involuntary manslaughter and criminal abandonment, which began in June, has revealed how the lack of a safety culture contributed to the huge death toll. In 2013 *Sewol*'s operator Chonghaejin Marine spent only about \$500 on safety education for its crews – and only \$2 of that went to staff on the *Sewol*.

Safety education for citizens

South Korea's renewed emphasis on maritime safety can be felt in the education system. The young lives lost on the *Sewol* have prompted changes at North Gyeongsang Province's National Youth Marine Environment Centre. A spokesperson for the centre – which runs maritime safety education programmes for young people – told *IHS Maritime* that the disaster has extended its curricula.

“Before the *Sewol* incident, our safety education programmes for teenage students included theoretical education in using fire extinguishers, aiming to train them to react swiftly in case of accidents,” said the spokesperson.

“We also taught students to perform cardiopulmonary resuscitation [CPR] and apply first aid. Students also participated in simulated rescues, using buoyancy. As jumping into the water individually in real life is very dangerous, we teach students to survive in a group using buoyancy. Now, we've also included the use of life rafts in our courses.”

When the *Sewol* began to capsize, some students dived into the water. Although some of them were rescued by the coastguard, others drowned. One equipment maker has shown its support for the centre's programmes by donating two life rafts.

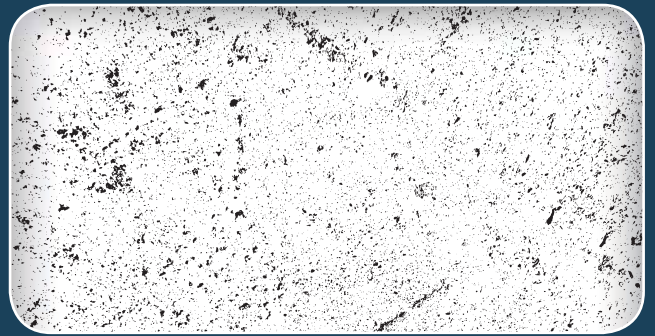
“After *Sewol*, we were able to strengthen our maritime education programme thanks to help from others who keenly feel the necessity of safety education for youths,” said the spokesperson. “Thanks to the donated life rafts, the youths at our centre can now learn how to launch life rafts. Conducting an evacuation drill is included in the course as well.”

The *Sewol* investigation found that the crew was ill-equipped to deal with emergencies and failed to conduct a proper evacuation, opting instead to abandon the vessel and let the coastguard rescue the passengers.

A teacher who participated with students



Safety courses being conducted at Korea Institute of Maritime and Fisheries Technology



Shantoustock, Korea Institute of Maritime and Fisheries Technology (KIMFT), National Youth Marine Environment Centre

in the centre's safety programme wrote in an evaluation form that a simulated rescue was more effective than the theoretical training the centre had been restricted to. A student said: "Thanks to the safety education, I will be able to act calmly in possible emergencies."

Practical safety education is now being promoted across South Korea. The Korea Maritime and Ocean University's lifelong education centre organised a safety education class for youths and adults from June to August. As the centre only accepted applications from groups of at least 50, some parents gathered their own groups to ensure their children could participate.

Elsewhere, fire stations in Gyeonggi Province have more than doubled their safety education programmes. In addition to employees at large companies, who are obliged to take part, demand is now coming from workers in small and medium-sized firms, local residents, and pre-school students. Effective evacuation has also been included in the safety education programmes. District offices have also swung into action.

Paldal District Office in Suwon City, Gyeonggi Province, has invited a safety instructor to conduct classes for its residents. Gangseo District Office in Seoul has revised a disaster and crisis manual and formed a group of volunteers to raise safety awareness.

Safety education

The *Sewol* crew's lack of safety training has prompted a revamp of courses at the Busan-based Korea Institute of Maritime and Fisheries Technology (KIMFT), which provides education and training for seafarers of merchant ships and fishing vessels.

KIMFT is now focusing more on practical training. One of the first steps has been cutting classes from 50 down to 20 pupils, so instructors can devote more attention to each student. Trainees will be evaluated on their practical training, in which they must achieve a pass to complete the course.

KIMFT told *IHS Maritime*: "Trainees who completed the changed safety education programme have become aware of the need for a more realistic response to

passengers, colleagues, and themselves in potential emergencies."

Practical training in courses has also been enhanced. More instructions and courses have been introduced for modules on abandoning ship, launching lifeboats, and expanding and boarding life floats. Only two of *Sewol*'s 46 lifeboats were reported to have been deployed.

KIMFT has also changed its textbooks to make them more relevant to actual emergency situations. KIMFT President Jung Hyung-taek said: "The change in the safety education programmes aims to prevent maritime accidents like the *Sewol* tragedy."

Government response

The government, under fire for its handling of the disaster, has amended legislation such as the Maritime Safety Act, requiring maritime safety superintendents to be registered with the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries.

Superintendents oversee ship operators and ports, but until the *Sewol* tragedy this oversight focused on post-accident measures.



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When national bodies or local authorities set up concerns that could affect maritime safety, superintendents must carry out inspections to ensure the businesses are safe. In addition, the ministry will consult with the founding entities about safety.

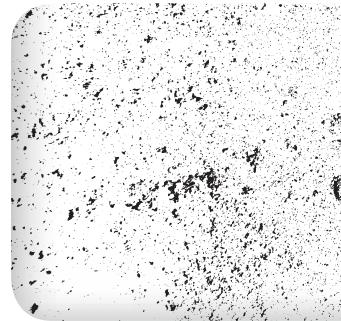
The loss of so many students and teachers on the *Sewol* has also led South Korea's government to amend the Act on the Prevention of and Compensation for Accidents at School. School principals must now prepare safety countermeasures for field trips or excursions. If a private company is to conduct a trip, the principal must check that the firm is licensed.

After the accident, the government immediately suspended all school trips, which only resumed from July. Excursions of more than 150 students have been discouraged and require the presence of a safety marshal.

South Korea's education ministry has also more than doubled its summer holiday safety education programmes, which include fire drills and traffic safety education. This summer



Korea Institute of Maritime and Fisheries Technology (KIMFT)



18,000 students are expected to participate.

Gyeonggi Provincial Office of Education, which oversees Danwon High School, announced on 3 August that it would establish South Korea's first safety support department. The new department will help implement safety policies and disaster prevention programmes. The education office said the department's role is to prevent tragedies such as the *Sewol* disaster.

As part of the government's new emphasis on maritime safety, on 10 August the

Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries also reduced the limit on permissible blood alcohol for crew members from 0.05% down to 0.03%.

However, greater interest in maritime safety could take time to bring results. Yun Jong-hwui, a professor at Korea Maritime and Ocean University, told *IHS Maritime*: "Any great system or regulation will be useless if a fundamental change on safety awareness is not ready." ◀

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