

South Korea mourns 100 killed in gas explosion

TAEGU, South Korea (AP) — Sweet incense filled the hot air as hundreds of students in navy blue blazers stood silently in their dusty schoolyard Sunday, bidding farewell to classmates killed by a gas explosion.

Forty-two students from the Yon Nam Middle School were among 100 people killed in Friday's blast, the latest in a string of disastrous accidents in South Korea.

Throughout the country, growing anger over lax enforcement of safety standards was directed at the government.

Police announced Sunday that seven people responsible for drilling a hole in a gas line against safety regulations would be arrested and charged with negligence.

The gas had poured out from the broken line and into the water main, collecting at a nearby subway construction site until a welding spark ignited it 20 minutes later.

About half the people killed were children on their way to school. At least 125 people were hospitalized in this city of 2.2 million, 140 miles south of Seoul.

The all-boys Yong Nam school lost 42 students, and their families and friends filled the schoolyard Sunday for a memorial service. Hearses circled the yard slowly.

"My poor son, my poor son," murmured Chung Mook-hee, hugging the white draped casket of her 13-year-old son, unwilling to let go.

At tables laden with fruit, boys came forward one by one to pour rice wine and say goodbye. Food and wine are symbolically offered in the Confucian funeral ritual in the belief that they will keep spirits happy.

"Jae-duk liked math. He was a good kid," said his father, his hands shaking as he lighted yet another cigarette. Tears

streamed down his face, but he made no effort to wipe them away.

The nation's grief increasingly was turning to anger as the investigation revealed that this accident, like recent disasters that preceded it, could have been prevented had safety measures been followed.

At an anti-government rally in Seoul, 2,500 students vented their anger.

"We no longer trust the future of the people to the accident-prone presidency, to Kim Young-sam's presidency," they declared in a statement issued at the rally to celebrate the eve of May Day.

"The government's promise has proven to be worthless," declared the *Korea Times* in an editorial.

"How many more lives until safety becomes rule?" asked another newspaper.

Hoping to dispel the growing furor, Kim had visited Taegu to console the victims, ordered safety checks, and said construc-

tion regulations will be changed to uproot bribery.

Top ministers met Sunday to map out future safety measures.

But newspapers pointed out that Kim had issued similar orders previously, and the string of manmade disasters had continued.

Shoddy construction and careless maintenance were blamed for the collapse of a bridge in Seoul last October that killed 32 people. Three days later, a fire swept through a crowded sightseeing ship south of Seoul, killing 30 people.

Other recent disasters have included a plane crash that killed 66; a train derailment that killed 78, and the sinking of an overloaded ferry that killed about 300. In each, the death toll could have been lower, or the accident prevented altogether, had safety measures been followed.

Sri Lankan peace hopes dashed

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka (AP) — Returning early from an overseas trip, Sri Lanka's president rushed into emergency meetings Sunday to discuss a series of rebel attacks that have pushed the island to the brink of full-scale war.

The military has suffered major losses since the Tamil rebels broke off peace talks April 19 and withdrew from a 3-month-old truce, charging the government was too slow to grant concessions.

Since then, at least 220 people, including 160 soldiers, have been killed. Rebel attacks have put half of the navy's eight large gunboats out of action, and missiles have downed two of its five Avro transport planes.

The use of anti-aircraft missiles — a first for the Tamil rebels in their 12-year war for a homeland — caught the military unaware and has raised questions about the peace talks President Chan-

drika Kumaratunga began in October.

Before leaving Paris, where she attended a meeting with aid donors, Kumaratunga indicated a military response was possible. "If we are attacked, we will attack," she said.

Some 34,000 people have been killed in the fighting for a Tamil homeland in the north and east of the island. The Tamil minority accuses Sri Lanka's Sinhalese majority of discrimination.

Kumaratunga won power last August by promising to end the strife. She had sought to win the backing of ordinary Tamils for her peace efforts, hoping to cut off support for the rebels. But that strategy would be jeopardized if all-out fighting leads to heavy civilian casualties.

Some politicians who supported her peace moves fear the renewed violence could shift decision-making on dealing with

the guerrillas from civilian officials to the military, which had warned that the Tamils would use a truce to stockpile arms.

The military has already forced Kumaratunga to change her decision to suspend arms purchases and she recently allowed officials to go overseas with a military shopping list.

"The situation is beyond the control of the government because the military will want to hit back," said Vasudeva Nanayakkara, a left-wing lawmaker.

Following the missile attacks Friday and Saturday, which killed 90 people, the military had little choice but to suspend flights to its six northern bases, which are surrounded by the guerrillas.

Since the navy was weakened, flights were the only way of replacing troops and bringing in food and logistic support.

Activists occupy oil platform to keep it from being junked

LONDON (AP) — Greenpeace activists occupied an old North Sea oil platform Sunday to stop it from being junked at sea.

Four climbers used ropes and winches to scale the Brent Spar, 118 miles north-east of the Shetland Islands. It is the first of the 400 North Sea oil platforms that are to be dumped at sea, with the government's permission.

Police and Shell U.K. Exploration and Production, which owns the platform, were monitoring the situation. No one has been arrested.

Greenpeace, which wants the platform dismantled and removed, said the climbers

have supplies for what is expected to be a long occupation on the platform, 90 feet above the sea. The Greenpeace ship *Moby Dick* was standing by.

Greenpeace said the Brent Spar contains over 100 tons of toxic sludge, including oil, arsenic, cadmium, PCBs and lead, plus more than 30 tons of radioactive waste left over from oil drilling and storage operations.

Shell defended its plans, saying in a statement that permission to dump the rig was granted "after a full evaluation of the technical, environmental, safety and cost factors." It made no mention of toxic materials.

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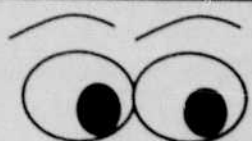
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