

Survivors of South Korean ferry tragedy struggle with guilt

By Youkyung Lee
The Associated Press

ANSAN, South Korea — “Field Trip” is still written in big letters on a calendar hanging on Yang Jeong-won’s old classroom wall.

The letters cover four days in April last year and mark one of the highlights of the year — a trip, by ferry, to a southern resort island. The sight still manages to shock Yang, one of the few students to survive a disaster that continues to horrify South Korea.

For many of the second-year high school students, the trip marked a last bit of freedom before nearly two years of gruelling preparation for college entrance exams. Teachers and other students waved at them from school windows as 17-year-old Yang and her classmates boarded busses at Danwon High School in the city of Ansan, about an hour drive south of Seoul.

Girls sang along to loud music and took selfies as they drove to the port of Incheon. Once heavy fog cleared, the *Sewol*, a 6,852-ton ferry, set off with 476 people on board, including 325 students and 14 teachers from Danwon.

That night, Yang and her classmates threw a surprise birthday party for a beloved teacher, Kim Cho-won, who turned 26 on the ship. A few minutes before midnight, the students lured Kim to a cabin and greeted her with a birthday cake, a happy birthday song, and a picture.

Several hours later, on the morning of April 16, 2014, the ferry listed, flipped upside down, and sank. More than 300 people died, many of them students trapped in cabins because the crew ordered them to stay put, even as the captain and others jumped onto an early-arriving coast guard boat. As the ship listed, Yang smashed into a wall. Students screamed and called their parents, cabinets falling onto them.

Yang, who had on a life jacket, managed to get to an exit and called out to rescuers, who saved her.

Out of 35 people in the birthday photo, she was one of only eight who lived. The teacher, Kim, didn’t make it.

A year later, Yang still can’t believe what happened to her friends. She’s now in her final year of high school, studying design and animation, part of a senior class that shrank from 338 to just 88 students.

“I sometimes wonder if some of the other students are still in the classroom, but no, this is all we have now,” she said.

Yang, a freckled, short-haired girl, takes medicine for anxiety. The feeling of the tilting ship still traumatizes her, and when she was on the 11th floor of a hospital last year, she felt like the building was leaning to one side. She grabbed her younger brother’s hand and ran down the steps to the first floor.

“If I had known this would happen, I would have tried to be better friends with more kids,” she said during a two-hour interview with The Associated Press.

She feels guilty about surviving.

“I came out of this alive, but my friends didn’t,” she said. “I once dreamed that relatives of those who died came to kill the survivors.”

Jang Dong-won, the father of another student who was rescued, said surviving students are still traumatized by memories of their friends during the last minutes of the sinking ship.

“One child missed a friend’s hands as the person was swept away by waves,” Jang said. “That last glance by the student who couldn’t move as a vending machine fell on them.”

They also are made to feel guilty by those around them.

“If they smile even just a little bit, they hear, ‘How can you smile?’ when most of their friends were killed, he said.

The ferry sinking also has dramatically changed the lives of siblings of victims.

After Choi Yun-ah, 24, lost her 17-year-old sister,

South Korea lifts travel ban on Japanese journalist

By Hyung-jin Kim
The Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea has lifted an overseas travel ban on a Japanese journalist charged with defaming the South Korean president, according to officials.

Tatsuya Kato had been banned from leaving South Korea since last August while prosecutors investigated his article about rumors that President Park Geun-hye was absent for seven hours during the ferry

disaster that left more than 300 people dead last year because she was with a man.

Seoul prosecutors eventually indicted Kato, a former Seoul bureau chief of the conservative *Sankei Shimbun* newspaper, last October. The indictment raised questions about South Korea’s media freedom.

The Seoul prosecutors’ office said the Justice Ministry had accepted its request to lift the travel ban. Hours after the announcement, Kato was seen by reporters at a Seoul airport ahead of his departure to Japan.

A senior prosecutor said the decision was made after judges determined that Kato’s report was inaccurate and that he had promised to attend the remaining sessions in his court case in Seoul. The prosecutor, speaking on condition of anonymity because the case is still ongoing, said the fact Kato’s aging mother is sick was also a factor in allowing him to return home.

The prosecutor said he had no information about when the court case would end or when a verdict was expected.



DRAMATIC DEVOTION. Filipino penitent Ruben Enaje (top photo, right) is nailed to the cross for the 29th time during Good Friday rituals at Cutud, Pampanga province, northern Philippines. Several Filipino devotees had themselves nailed to crosses to remember Jesus Christ’s suffering and death, an annual rite frowned upon by church leaders in the predominantly Roman Catholic country. In the bottom photo, a hooded Filipino penitent plays with his son after his flagellation during Good Friday rituals to atone for sins. (AP Photos/Aaron Favila)

Filipino devotees nailed to crosses in Good Friday rites

By Joael Calupitan
The Associated Press

SAN PEDRO CUTUD, The Philippines — Screaming in pain, Filipino devotees had themselves nailed to wooden crosses to mimic the suffering of Jesus Christ on Good Friday in Asia’s largest Roman Catholic nation.

Church leaders have spoken against the annual practice mixing Catholic devotion with folk belief, but it still draws big crowds, particularly in northern Pampanga province.

Painter Ruben Enaje, 54, was among half a dozen men whose hands and feet were rubbed with alcohol before locals dressed as Roman soldiers hammered sterilized nails into his flesh.

He has repeated the same act for the last 29 years as part of giving thanks after surviving a fall from a building. This year, he added a gadget — a small microphone near his mouth, although a technical glitch made it difficult to hear him utter Christ’s last words.

The reenactment of Christ’s crucifixion at a dusty mound in San Pedro Cutud village drew at least 4,000 spectators and tourists, dozens of them foreigners. Unlike in the past, organizers this year banned foreigners from being nailed to crosses to prevent the event from “becoming a circus,” said councillor Harvey Quiwa.

After they were lowered from the crosses, medical workers carried the devotees on a stretcher and made sure there were no complications from their injuries.

“I think it takes an incredible amount of dedication and commitment to really go through something like that,” said American tourist Tracy Sengillo. “It’s really fascinating.”

Devotees undergo the crucifixions in the belief that such extreme sacrifices are a way to atone for their sins, attain miracle cures for illnesses, or give thanks to god.

Similar re-enactments were held in other villages around Pampanga and in other provinces, but San Pedro Cutud attracts most crowds.

Before the crucifixions, hundreds of barefoot devotees walked the streets whipping their bare backs with bamboo sticks dangling from a rope.

“I started doing this when my mother got sick, kidney problem. I vowed and prayed to god so that she could be cured,” said electrician Marvin Tao, 25, who has been a flagellant for nine years.

Associated Press writer Teresa Cerrojano in Manila, the Philippines, contributed to this report.



LINGERING LAST MINUTES. Park Bona, sister of Danwon High School student Seong-ho, who died on the sinking *Sewol* ferry, prays for her brother at the cathedral near the group memorial altar in Ansan, South Korea. After Park’s 17-year-old brother died on the ferry, Park stopped caring about the things most other 20-something South Koreans are obsessed with. The *Sewol* ferry sank on April 16, 2014, killing 304 people including 250 Danwon High School students on a school field trip. In the bottom photo, survivor Yang Jeong-won, a student who was rescued from the ferry, puts her head on her desk inside a classroom at Danwon High School in Ansan, South Korea, which has become a memorial for her classmates who were killed.

Yun-min, in the sinking, she quit her office job. She then reached out to other siblings of ferry victims from Danwon. Siblings, she says, often have no one else to turn to because they are afraid of putting more of a burden on their grieving parents.

“Siblings are victims too, but no one in the world knows about it,” Choi said. She has made art out of messages from 51 siblings to their dead sisters and brothers.

She has also overcome her previous reticence and become more vocal about the sinking.

“Kids died because they were asked to stay still,” Choi said. “If I stay obedient and listen to what grownups tell me to do, it will damage me, so I now speak my mind.”

After Park Bona’s 17-year-old brother died on the ferry, Park stopped caring about the things most other 20-something South Koreans are obsessed with.

“After I lost Seong-ho, working at a big company, graduating from college, making a lot of money — it all became meaningless to me,” Park said as she sat in a makeshift church near a memorial altar for the victims. “What does it even mean to get married in a country that can’t even protect my brother?”

Park, a 21-year-old who was majoring in Korean language and literature in college, is now preparing to transfer to another university. She wants to help society remember the dead teenagers and to make the country a safer place.

Yang, meanwhile, is still wrestling with why friends who could have been saved had to die.

She feels angry at the ferry operator. The ship became top-heavy after a redesign added more cargo space. She blames the government for not regulating ferry operators more carefully.

Yang is also enraged by the ship’s crew, who escaped when students were trapped because they were told to wait inside.

“They should be punished as heavily as possible,” she said. “It would be very hard for me to forgive them.”