

Realizing change after the *Sewol* tragedy by David Hamon and Seongjin James Ahn

David Hamon (david.hamon@anser.org) is the director of Banyan Analytics. S. James Ahn (seongjin.ahn@anser.org) is an analyst at Banyan Analytics. The views expressed are solely the authors'. [Click here to read the online version of this article.](#)

The April tragedy of the ferry *Sewol* sinking off the coast of South Korea has brought that country to a crossroads. There has been a collective national attempt to pull the country together by addressing immediate issues that have emerged from the tragedy. The public outcry of grief and anger is palpable, and will not soon disappear. As Korean citizens ask tough, fundamental questions in search of explanations that could account for the disaster, authorities have struggled to find answers. As of this writing, some 12 victims have yet to be found. As the search for the remaining victims continues, South Koreans at all levels appear to be united and ready to take difficult steps to ensure nothing like this happens again.

In some ways, the impact of the tragedy on South Korea is reminiscent of the effect that Hurricane Katrina had on the United States. A developed nation, stricken by a tragic event, found its local, state, and federal authorities shockingly ill-prepared to coordinate an efficient and effective response to an emergency. After Katrina, the US government was drawn into a period of deep introspection that resulted in significant institutional changes to FEMA as well as legislative and policy improvements to emergency preparedness and disaster management in the US. The national sentiment after Katrina was “never again.” This could be South Korea’s Katrina moment.

Effecting real change

The most essential question for South Korea after the *Sewol* tragedy is: what *real* changes will be implemented and enforced by the government to fundamentally repair the nation, enabling it to avoid such national catastrophes? In her May 19 address, President Park Geun-hye provided a thoughtful outline of the government’s plans for reorganization, which will strip authority from agencies that failed in their duties and assign them to others. She also described bills that will be proposed in the National Assembly aimed at combating the corrosive collusion that exists between regulators and businesses and enables tragedies like this.

In a sign that public safety has emerged as a key political priority in South Korea, in late June a special parliamentary committee is starting its investigation into the *Sewol* disaster by receiving reports from relevant government agencies. However effective the reforms that President Park announced may become, it is important to underscore that the legislative and organizational changes that have been proposed must

occur in tandem. The government has the ultimate responsibility to lead in the effort, and if any of the reform measures (enhancements to emergency preparedness capabilities, improvements in rules and regulations, and contending against public- and private-sector corruption) are not implemented and effectively enforced, the country will not be prepared for the next national emergency.

A nation’s system of emergency preparedness is only as effective as the trained and skilled professionals who make it operational, and rules and regulations are effective only insofar as they are observed, complied with, and guarded from corruption. Therefore, to be effective, the changes that Park pursues should be comprehensive, not piecemeal. Moreover, emergency preparedness and disaster management policies should be comprehensive in and of themselves because they are most effective when they are part of a full spectrum of preparedness activities, including planning, training, and exercising. The personnel recruited to manage the system must be professional, held accountable to the public, and most of all above reproach.

Facing the past

As President Park acknowledged in her address, South Korea has an unfortunate record of corruption between the public and private sectors. Corruption has negatively affected safety standards in various industries in South Korea, and has made it difficult to enforce rules and regulations to counter corruption. For example, in December 1995, an event strikingly similar to that of the *Sewol* incident occurred in what was dubbed South Korea’s “biggest peacetime disaster”: a department store in Seoul collapsed due to shoddy construction that courts deemed was made possible by corruption. The building’s collapse caused more than 500 fatalities and, according to a news report, prosecutors asserted that the owner was “more concerned with maximizing profits than customer safety,” and that city officials were “willing to take bribes in exchange for allowing illegal design and construction.” As a result, the owner of the building, his son, and 23 others were sentenced or fined. Similar events occurred in 1970 and 1994, which also resulted in prison sentences or political resignations.

The nation tightened building safety rules after these incidents, but questions linger as to whether the government enforces rules and regulations across industries. For example, was the *Sewol* ferry tragedy a rare and unfortunate exception amid overall enhancements in national safety standards and declining corruption? Last year an anonymous whistleblower exposed corrupt practices that affected safety standards in the Korean nuclear energy industry. This anonymous tip, which exposed corruption in nuclear energy safety and regulation and may have saved the country from a nuclear disaster, put nuclear facilities in South Korea under a microscope. As with

the *Sewol* disaster, similar kinds of failures originate from a lack of adherence to safety standards despite the rules in place. Compliance monitoring and enforcement of regulations must go hand in hand with effective emergency preparedness.

Emergency preparedness and systemic change

The multiple deficiencies that led to the *Sewol* disaster all point to systemic failure: inadequate regulation and oversight allowing the illegal redesign of the vessel, enabling the overloading of cargo; inexperience and inadequate safety drills among the crew to react during an emergency; the authorities' overall slow response to the problem; deficient response by several layers of responders, including the Coast Guard rescuing the captain and crew before the passengers; and overall poor communication and information collection. As demonstrated in the construction and nuclear energy industry examples above, each deficiency has parallels across other industries. Improvements that will enable a new and effective emergency preparedness system in South Korea as promised by President Park demand change on a systemic level because preventing the multiple failures that lead to disasters will have a far greater impact than responding after disaster has struck. Fortunately, in the aftermath of the *Sewol* tragedy, there is a renewed interest across civil society in enhancing the emergency preparedness and disaster response capabilities of the South Korean government.

The government in Seoul may need to fundamentally alter its approach to the twin challenges of national safety regulation enforcement and emergency preparedness. The two issues are inextricably linked at all levels: federal, provincial, and local, and across all sectors of society. If successful, South Korea could even become a regional example and leader of all-hazards disaster response. Following the triple disaster of March 2011, Japan reached out to other Asian nations to share lessons learned and aid in capacity building. Korea should do the same.

The United States can assist its ally in building effective preparedness systems. Presidential Policy Directive #8 details an approach that can be exported to South Korea and used as a template to build policies corresponding to important documents like National Frameworks for Prevention, Protection, Mitigation, Response, and Recovery, as well as the National Incident Management System (which includes the incident command system). Borrowing from these approaches may help integrate government authorities with security services, the Republic of Korea military, public health agencies, hospitals, the local Red Cross, and other non-governmental organizations. Emergency preparedness experts in the US government can provide technical advice and important lessons learned from our Katrina moment. However, such systems will need to be adapted to be culturally appropriate, fit into the bureaucratic landscape, and be politically and fiscally sustainable in the context of South Korea.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.