

Arrests over S. Korea train fire

Monday, February 24, 2003 Posted: 1:10 AM EST (0610 GMT)

DAEGU, South Korea -- South Korean police say they have arrested seven subway workers over a deadly underground fire that killed at least 130 people and left hundreds more missing.

Authorities will seek to indict the group, which includes the drivers of the two trains engulfed by flames and smoke when the fire broke out last Tuesday in Daegu, the country's third-largest city.

While police did not specify the charges, weekend news reports said they were seeking charges of negligence. Police are also trying to obtain arrest warrants for three others recovering in hospital.

Two of them are subway officials and the third is the suspected arsonist, identified as a truck driver with a history of mental illness. He told police he was intent on committing suicide in a crowded place.

As many as 600 people were on the trains or in the subway station when, witnesses said, the 56-year-old suspect, identified as Kim Dae-han, ignited a plastic container filled with a flammable liquid. An eyewitness said he was playing with a cigarette lighter and dropped it after being pushed.

The fire quickly engulfed the six-car train he was riding on and then spread to a passing train, and soon the entire station.

Most victims were on the second train, where the conductor allegedly fled without opening the doors, leaving victims trapped inside. The doors only opened in two of the train's six cars, police said.

Strong chemical fumes and heavy black smoke prevented firefighters from making a quick rescue, with victims dying of burns, trampling, and suffocation.

Only 46 bodies have been identified positively, authorities said. Many victims were burned beyond recognition and officials said it may take months to identify them through DNA tests.

Police are vigorously pursuing an investigation into why the death toll was so high in a country that already has a poor record on public safety.

The death toll left South Koreans aghast and questions are being asked about whether many more people could have been saved.



South Koreans are angry at what they see as key safety lapses



More than 300 people are still listed as missing

A key focus has been why doors on one of the two trains involved were kept shut, and why train operators allowed the second train to arrive.

Had the train been equipped with fire-resistant seats and floor tiles, many said, it probably would not have burst into flames. An apparent lack of adequate emergency lighting also left victims vulnerable, groping in the dark after the lights went out.

Daegu is about 200 miles (320 km) southeast of Seoul.

-- CNN Seoul Bureau Chief Sohn Jie-ae, The Associated Press and Reuters contributed to this report.