

# South Korean lithium battery fire kills 23 workers

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A terrible factory blaze, evidently ignited after battery cells exploded inside a lithium battery manufacturing plant, killed 23 mostly contract workers and injured eight more in Hwaseong, an industrial area just 50 kilometres southwest of Seoul, the South Korean capital, on Monday.

Firefighters with search dogs combed the gutted structure on Tuesday and found the remains of the last person who had been unaccounted for. Seventeen of those who died were ethnic Korean Chinese contract workers, and one was Laotian.

The factory was a three-storey building with a reinforced concrete structure and a gross floor area of more than 2,300 square metres. Approximately 35,000 lithium batteries were estimated to be stored on the second floor.

When the fire started, sparks burst and white smoke rose, followed by several explosions from piles of batteries, according to surveillance video footage from the inside of the factory, shown on local media.

Workers tried to contain the flame with extinguishers but failed, the video showed. It took only 15 seconds for the fire to go from white smoke to intense combustion, with smoke filling the entire area.

The workers inside the second-floor location likely lost consciousness and succumbed within seconds, a local fire official said.

Many of the victims were yet to be identified because of the intensity of the explosions and inferno. An official at the funeral home where the foreign workers' bodies were taken told Reuters they were impossible to identify immediately.

Some distraught family members tried to enter the factory site, which had been cordoned off. Reuters reported: "In tears, Chae Sung-bum rushed to a battery factory on the outskirts of South Korea's capital on Tuesday hoping to find the body of his daughter, or at least the necklace that would identify her."

Chae told Reuters: "My daughter used to say batteries are dangerous, dangerous," adding that she called several days ago and talked about another fire at her factory. He said his daughter, a Chinese national, was 39 and due to be married within a few months.

More than half the 103 workers at the factory, including most of those killed, were temporary workers hired by a manpower contractor at the plant, run by South Korea-based Aricell, majority-owned by S-Connect, which supplies batteries to Samsung.

A worker at the factory said most of the employees were ethnic Korean women between the ages of 30 and 40 from northeast China. Most of the victims worked on the second floor, mainly in the battery packaging and welding workshops, according to China's *Global Times*.

Aricell makes lithium primary batteries for sensors and radio communication devices. The factory was reportedly storing mostly primary batteries, which pose a lower risk of fire than rechargeable lithium-ion batteries. Even so, primary batteries can be dangerous because lithium in general is highly reactive to air and heat. Lithium batteries burn hot and fast and are difficult to control with conventional fire extinguishing methods.

In a country with a history of industrial disasters, the tragedy raises further questions about unsafe and exploitative conditions in the facilities feeding corporate global supply chains.

Kim Jin-young, a local fire official, said the victims likely failed to escape via stairs to the ground. He said that authorities would investigate whether there were fire extinguishing systems at the site and if they worked.

On Tuesday, Aricell CEO Park Soon-kwan offered condolences to the workers who were killed and apologised to everyone who had been affected by the accident. Yet he said the company had complied with all required safety precautions and training.

Foreign workers are increasingly exploited in South

Korea, where the government is expanding foreign labour quotas to supply employers with workers, especially for small factories, shipyards and farms.

A record number of 923,000 foreigners are working in South Korea, of which one-third are Chinese nationals of Korean descent, according to government statistics last year. These workers are almost three times more likely to die in industrial accidents as they work under more unsafe conditions than domestic workers, according to a study last year published in the *Journal of Korea Safety Management & Science*.

The number of industrial accidents among foreign workers increased to 8,286 in 2022 from 6,404 in 2012, with about 100 deaths every year, the labour ministry said. Choi Jung-gyu, a lawyer who specialises in labour issues, told Reuters that safety laws and regulations existed but there was a lack of checks to see if they were being implemented.

South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported that Monday's fire was likely to go down as the worst chemical plant accident in the country's history, "with experts raising questions about lax safety measures as the cause of the disaster."

One of the worst chemical plant disasters was at the LG Chem plant explosion in Yeosu, 316 kilometres south of Seoul, in 1989, which resulted in the deaths of 16 people and 17 others being injured.

In 2011, three workers died and five others were injured in an oil mist explosion at an HDC Hyundai EP plant in the southeastern city of Ulsan. In 2012, eight people were killed and around ten injured after a chemical solvent drum can exploded at an LG Chem plant in the central city of Cheongju.

Across other industries and public facilities too, deadly fires are common in South Korea, despite repeated claims by successive governments to be addressing the lack of safety measures.

In 2020, a fire at a construction site in Icheon, near Seoul, killed at least 38 workers and injured another 10. Icheon was also the location of a deadly fire in 2008 that killed 40 workers in a refrigerated warehouse.

Another 46 people died in a 2018 fire at a hospital in Miryang that lacked sprinkler systems. A month before that, in December 2017, 29 people were killed at a sports centre in Jecheon, which also had no sprinklers.

Other disasters also point to the subordination of safety in the interests of corporate profit or due to government indifference, despite repeated public protests. Last year, 14 people were killed when an underground roadway in

the central town of Osong flooded during heavy rain. Authorities were accused of failing to properly control traffic on the roadway and delaying their response to emergency calls.

The 2022 crowd crush in Itaewon, which left 159 people dead, was also considered a man-made disaster. The sinking of the overloaded Sewol ferry in 2014 caused the deaths of 304 people, mostly high school students.

Like every other government in the past, President Yoon Suk Yeol's unpopular right-wing administration is feigning sorrow over Monday's tragedy and pledging to investigate and take action. "I ask the ministries of labour and industry and the National Fire Agency to conduct an urgent safety inspection and, where there is concern of an accident, take immediate measures," Prime Minister Han Duck-soo said at a cabinet meeting.

Yet, the previous government of President Moon Jae-in, a Democrat, made similar vows. Its new "safety measures" enacted in 2018 were cosmetic. They involved pro forma inspections, with little done to address actual safety violations, let alone to demand the installation of protective equipment and ensure companies followed safety regulations.

Despite a crushing defeat for his People Power Party in April's general election, President Yoon is pushing forward with deeper attacks on the working class, including "labour flexibility." That means expanding the workweek from 52 to 69 hours and significant wage and job cuts, all in line with the demands of big business.

Whatever steps are taken after this latest fire, the unsafe conditions and disregard for workers, including irregular and foreign workers, will continue. The official token words of condolence will be forgotten until the next disaster, only to be offered again to try to appease public anger and cover up the inherent indifference to the lives of workers under capitalism.



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