Five years on, truth of Sewol disaster still shrouded in mystery

Sewol ferry disaster changed Korea but truth-finding work remains

By Lee Suh-yoon

The 2014 Sewol ferry disaster left a painful and lasting imprint on Korean society. Ahead of its fifth anniversary on April 16, ceremonies have taken place since the weekend to mourn its 304 victims and to keep pushing for better safety and disaster response systems.

At Gwanghwamun Square last Saturday, thousands gathered with victims' families to remember the tragedy and demand further investigation into the causes of the sinking. Similar memorial gatherings took place in other cities, including Mokpo where the rusted ferry stands near its port after being
salvaged.

The 6,825-ton ferry sank off the southwestern tip of the country on April 16, 2014. Of the 476 passengers onboard, only 172 survived. Most of the dead or missing were students from Danwon High School on their way to a field trip on Jeju Island.

The government's slow and botched rescue operation gutted the public's trust in the conservative Park Geun-hye administration.

The ferry disaster, and the yellow ribbons that people wore or posted on their social media profiles to show sympathy for the victims, became symbolic of broader political dissatisfaction and need for government transparency and accountability. In the 2016 candlelit rallies against now-impeached President Park, the memory of the ferry disaster united demonstrators against what they saw as a corrupt and aloof administration.

Photos of Danwon High School students are on display in a new wooden structure housing a commemorative exhibition of the ferry disaster at Gwanghwamun Square in central Seoul, Friday. / Korea Times photo by Hong Yoon-ki
Some say the collective mourning and reflection on the disaster has already changed Korean society for the better.

"The Candlelit Revolution and the successful quenching of the wildfire in Goseong and Sokcho are representative of how the Sewol ferry disaster changed Korean society," Bae Seo-young, head of the April 16 joint civic committee, told The Korea Times, Sunday. "This shift to a civic conscience that refuses to stay silent to injustice, and the prioritization of citizens' lives and safety in these quick national responses to disaster shows Korean society has started to change."

Yet work still remains on uncovering why the Jeju-bound ferry sank. The two preceding special investigative committees found signs the ship was overloaded and sailing with defective steering controls. But the model simulations conducted at the Maritime Research Institute Netherlands (MARIN) could not replicate the exact angle and rate of the ship's sharp turn
before it capsized — leaving open the possibility of outside factors such as a collision according to some committee members. But no signs of major damage were found on the ship's hull after it was lifted from the seabed.

The ship now stands upright at Mokpo New Port, its rust-caked hull a testament to the ship's time underwater. A CCTV recorder found in the main hall on the third floor of the ship had signs of evidence-tampering, the third investigative committee announced recently, saying the recording device, submitted by the Navy to the prosecution, only retained footage of the last three minutes of the Sewol's 100 minute-long descent into the sea.
"I was appalled they could even think of tampering with the video recorder," said Jung Sung-ook, father of Jung Dong-su, a Danwon High School student killed in the disaster. Jung, a member of April 16 Sewol Families for Truth and a Safer Society, told The Korea Times, Monday, "Finding the truth behind the death of Dong-su is what has kept me going all these years. I have a photo of him taken by the maritime police when they found him on May 6, 2014. I carry it with me and take it out when I need the strength to keep going."

Jung and other family members of the victims want Cheong Wa Dae to set up a team of prosecutors with special investigative powers to complement the current fact-finding committee for a thorough probe into the former Park administration and relevant government bodies.

"I can't trust the prosecution [to do the job alone]. From what we have experienced, they still regard the Sewol ferry disaster as a maritime traffic accident," Yoo Kyung-geun, another bereaved parent, said in a taped message attached to an online petition on the Cheong Wa Dae website. "The truth-finding work into the disaster must be carried out properly this time and finished once and for all."
As a part of this truth-finding effort, the bereaved families announced the first in a series of "guilty" people in relation to the disaster on Monday. The list included the then-head of the maritime police, former President Park, then-minister of oceans and fisheries, and then-head of the National Intelligence Service.

"The government officials who ordered passengers to stay in their seats and maintained that order for 100 minutes after the boat began to sink — it was a state-led crime that blocked the victims' escape," Bae said at Monday's press conference in Gwanghwamun Square.
A bereaved parent of the Sewol ferry disaster scans the list of the deceased's' names on the walls of a wooden building set up at Gwanghwamun Square to commemorate the disaster victims, Monday. / Korea Times photo by Shim Hyun-chul

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