

Fire rages through illegal teen beer hall, killing 54

by Sonni Efron and Shin Bong Gun
Los Angeles Times

INCHON, South Korea -- At least 54 South Koreans, mainly high school students, were killed and 75 others were injured Saturday in a fire that trapped more than 100 people inside a cramped, illegal beer hall in the port city of Incheon, 30 miles west of Seoul.

Authorities said 97 of the 129 known victims were under the age of 18, the legal drinking age in Korea, and the youngest person killed in the blaze was just 13.

One girl who survived alleged that the bar door had been locked from the outside.

Many of the teenagers died from inhaling smoke and toxic fumes in a second-floor beer hall and a third-floor billiard room in a building that had windows that did not open, narrow corridors, only one small exit, and no sprinklers, officials and witnesses said Sunday. Police arrested four workers for alleged safety violations and reportedly were searching for the owner of the beer hall, which was a popular teen hangout and was known as a place where underage revelers could buy alcoholic drinks.

Eight days before the inferno, police had ordered the beer hall to be shut down for doing business without a license, and a spot check by local authorities Wednesday found that the establishment was closed. Lee Se-Young, chief of the city's Jung Ju district, said Sunday.

From her hospital bed, one seriously burned high school student told her family and friends that after the fire broke out, but before it began to spread, the bar manager allegedly told his staff to lock the door of the beer hall and not let the

customers leave until they paid for their drinks. He then allegedly left. Survivor Ko Jin Mi, 16, who was in the intensive-care unit suffering from burns and smoke inhalation, scrawled the allegations in a note to

safety violations.

According to local media reports, officials believe that Saturday's blaze broke out in an underground karaoke bar that was undergoing renovation, when a spark

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-Ko Kyung Mi,
older sister of burn victim

a friend and repeated them to her older sister, but two local officials said they had no information and could not confirm her story. However, an inspection of the bar's steel door showed that the door frame was severely bent and damaged, with one side detached in what appeared to have been an effort to force the door open.

The local fire chief, Kim Myong Hwan, said that when firefighters arrived, they found the steel door open. However, Myong said the windows did not open and were made of a thick, reinforced glass that the youngsters were unable to break. Had they been able to vent the smoke or jump from the windows, he said, they might have survived.

The fire was the worst blaze in South Korea since 1974. It raised fresh concerns about disaster safety in a nation where 19 kindergarten children and four adults died just four months ago in a summer-camp fire that was blamed on corrupt officials overlooking egregious fire

from a broken lightbulb ignited paint thinner. The blaze then spread up through the four-story wood-and-brick building, a 20-year-old structure that was located in the entertainment district of Incheon, South Korea's third-largest city. Patrons in a ground-floor restaurant managed to escape, but more than 120 people who were upstairs were trapped.

"In a word, it was an inferno," said Myong, the fire chief. "Teenagers were entangled in several layers, with some groaning when firefighters smashed the doors and windows open. There were fire extinguishers in the beer hall, but there was no time for anybody to use them because the victims were immediately suffocated by toxic smoke."

Firefighters were able to extinguish the blaze in 13 minutes.

Ko Kyung Mi, 20, the older sister of burn victim Ko Jin Mi, said she had passed by the bar Saturday night and saw the fire but did not realize until she saw a television news report later that evening that

her younger sister was inside.

"I've been to that place several times as well," she told the *Los Angeles Times*. "It's very small, a very closed space, with very small entrances and lots of chairs and furniture," making it difficult to move around, she said.

"Everyone knows this bar is just for youngsters," she said, adding that she suspected the bar had an informant who tipped off the owner when authorities were to inspect the establishment. "Every time the police had a surprise inspection, the owner kicked the children out and shut down the bar," Ko Kyung Mi said. "But I am sure that the police knew about the situation."

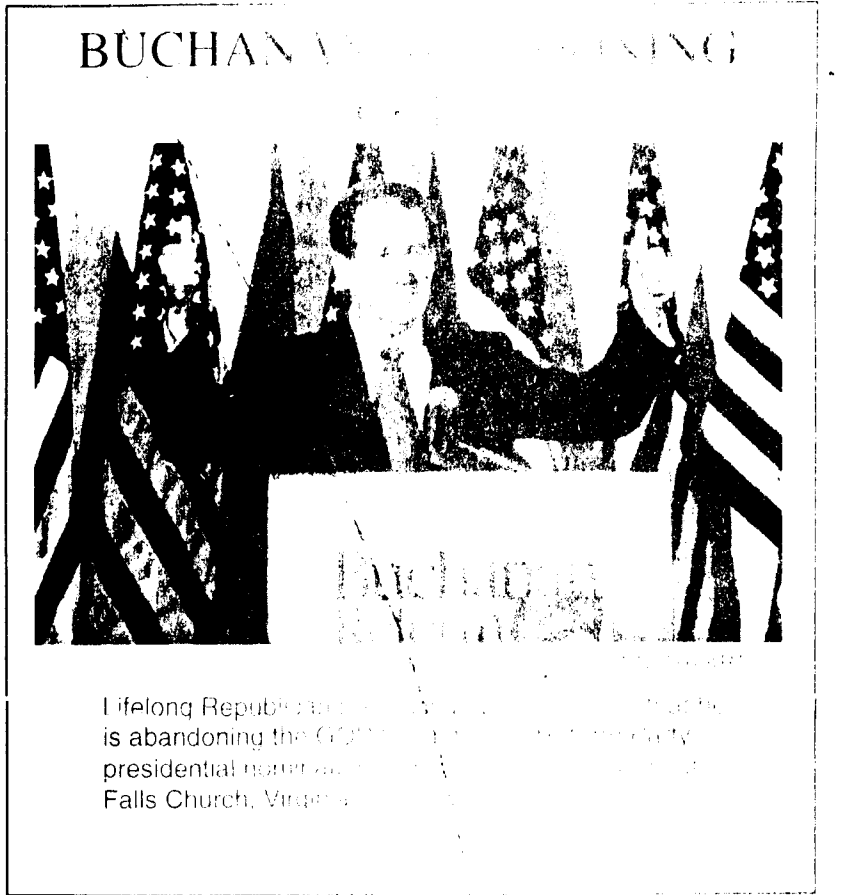
When Ko Kyung Mi walked by the building Saturday evening, she saw the fire spreading, she said.

"I saw some children coming down at the beginning of the fire, but for some reason, once the fire started to spread, no one was coming down anymore," she said. "My sister is the only survivor of all of her friends who were there. She is the only one."

Ko Kyung Mi quoted her sister as telling her that "the owner of the bar said to lock the door, and then ran away."

A classmate, Kim Nang Oh, 16, who came to Incha University Hospital to visit Ko Jin Mi, said the injured girl had written her a note charging that the bar manager had locked the beer hall door from the outside.

"It was the children's fault for being there in the first place, but adults must be responsible for providing these sorts of spaces," Ko Kyung Mi said.



Lifelong Republican ... is abandoning the GOP presidential nomination ... Falls Church, Virginia

GOP candidates debate without Bush

by Dick Polman
Knight Ridder News Service
October 29, 1999

HANOVER, N.H. -- With his name as the front-runner, George W. Bush sent once again from a party that has sent him to the presidency, his rivals on Tuesday staged an issue-oriented debate before a national television audience for the right to be viewed as the prime challenger in the GOP's presidential primary state.

But if all the most prominent candidates, that title fell to the former Texas Gov. John McCain of Arizona. McCain's numbers have soared in the polls since last night, while Bush's numbers have fallen. Last night, while the candidates generally stressed conservative issues that appeal to the GOP's primary voters, McCain polished his maverick image. He inveighed against "special interests," touted changes in campaign finance laws, and told his audience, "I will give the government back to you." He also sought to distinguish his reform agenda from the principles of the program of private school vouchers that could be financed with federal money that now goes to public schools and interests as the sugar industry and other industries.

The event, much like the debate session between Vice President Al Gore and former Sen. Bill Bradley, the Democratic presidential nominee, was promoted not so much as a Republican debate than as a "town hall" style event. It was co-sponsored by CBS and a local ABC affiliate, WMUR, and McCain, meanwhile, made a special announcement with WMUR, talking about his support during the dinner hour news program. McCain's wife, who he met in high school, said she wanted to be with his wife, but she was due to receive a letter from her alumnus, Southern Methodist University. He said, "I have a wife and a wife."

He said that he had been granted the state for granted, on the condition that "I know I have a lot of work to do." But millionaire business mogul Bill Forbes, who's pumping his money into Bush wealth into his presidential campaign, said he was frustrated by the front-runner. He said that he had skipped a debate last Friday, but he had to attend a fund-raiser.

The persistent protests and the fact that thousands of Falun Gong followers have come to Beijing in recent weeks to oppose the ban are signs that the government is having difficulty crushing the movement. More than 3,000 people have been arrested in Beijing in the last month, and the *Beijing Morning Post* reported Saturday that police discovered 201 Falun Gong practitioners living illegally in rented rooms in the city during a mid-October sweep.

Red Cross confirms Russian strike on civilian convoy in Chechnya

by David Hoffman
The Washington Post

MOSCOW -- The International Committee of the Red Cross confirmed Saturday that Russian warplanes struck a convoy of civilians in Chechnya on Friday, killing 25 people and injuring 70.

In a statement from Geneva, the agency said the convoy included vehicles from the Chechen branch of the Russian Red Cross, and that the five vehicles in the convoy were clearly marked with a Red Cross emblem. The Red Cross said the vehicles were returning from the Chechen-Ingush border, which had been closed by the Russians.

The Red Cross statement is the first confirmation of an attack on civilians, which Russia has denied since the first reports on Friday. The Red Cross, citing confirmation from its local workers, said a rocket fired from a

Russian warplane hit a truck, killing two Red Cross workers and seriously injuring a third. Nearby vehicles also came under fire, the agency said.

The attack has been shrouded by conflicting accounts. A Chechen official, Ramsan Abuyev, told the Reuters news agency that about 40 refugees died and 100 others were injured when their convoy came under fire near the village of Shami-Yurt, west of Grozny, the Chechen capital. He said six vehicles were destroyed. Reuters also quoted a nurse who said she saw the attack.

On Friday and again Saturday, the Russian military denied attacking a civilian convoy. The Russian air force press service said warplanes were targeting trucks carrying Chechen fighters and weapons. The Russians said the trucks were attacked on a highway west of Grozny because "assault rifles" were fired at an Su-25 fighter jet. The air force said two trucks were destroyed.

Both sides have been engaged in a fierce propaganda war that has made it difficult to ascertain the truth about the fighting in Chechnya. The Russian Defense Ministry claimed Saturday that Chechen gunmen are blowing up their own houses "to make it look like Russian air strikes." The Russians also renewed their claim Saturday that they are carrying out strikes only on "Islamic militants" and "terrorists," but hospitals are overflowing with civilian casualties from the month-long military assault on separatist guerrillas.

Fighting continued Saturday around Grozny and Chechnya's second-largest city, Gudermes. Russian television reports said military forces were outside Gudermes but did not yet plan to seize the city.

Russian Su-24 and Su-25 jet fighters continued to pound Grozny, flying 50 sorties in the past day, Russian military officials said. They claimed to

have bombed an electronics plant, and there were reports of a large explosion from the bombing of the Grozny oil refinery.

Russia appears to be laying siege to Gudermes and Grozny, unleashing an aerial bombardment and artillery fire and surrounding both cities, but not yet taking them street by street. It was in such urban combat that the Russian army suffered heavy losses five years ago in the first Chechen war.

Reports from Grozny said most people have fled the city, and those remaining hide in cellars at the sound of approaching aircraft.

In recent days, Russia sealed the border between Chechnya and Ingushetia, Chechnya's tiny western neighbor, and refugees fleeing the combat have been camping out there. A promise to open the border Friday was not honored.

China clears way for death sentences for Falun Gong leaders

by John Pomfret
The Washington Post

BEIJING -- China stepped up its crackdown Saturday against the banned Falun Gong spiritual movement, whose members protested in silence for a sixth consecutive day, by passing a law that opens the way for death sentences for group leaders.

Police hauled away several dozen protesters as hundreds of tourists enjoying a bright autumn day on Tiananmen Square looked on. There apparently was no repeat of Thursday's violence when police beat, kicked, bloodied and yanked the hair of several elderly protesters.

By a unanimous vote, the 114-

member executive committee of the National People's Congress ruled that leaders of religious cults may be prosecuted for murder and endangering national security, two of China's most serious crimes. The government characterized Falun Gong as a "cult" on Thursday, asserting that 1,400 people have died as a result of their involvement in the Buddhist-like spiritual movement. The government charges that most of those deaths resulted from Falun Gong encouraging its followers to stop going to the doctor, a charge denied by Li Hongzhi, Falun Gong's leader, who is based in the New York borough of Queens.

"The decision says that courts, prosecutors, police and administra-

tive judicial organs must be on full alert for cult activities and smash them rigorously in accordance with the law," the official New China News Agency reported. In a sign of the government's willingness to impose the harshest possible measures on movement leaders, the news agency mentioned the case of Liu Jiaguo, the leader of a popular group in Hunan province called Principal God. Liu was charged with raping 11 women and was executed.

Saturday's vote marked another step in China's troubled campaign to suppress the Falun Gong movement, which preaches conventional morality and believes its practice is beneficial to the body's fundamental energy.

The suppression campaign, which began July 22, has dominated China's state-controlled airwaves and newspapers ever since.

The persistent protests and the fact that thousands of Falun Gong followers have come to Beijing in recent weeks to oppose the ban are signs that the government is having difficulty crushing the movement. More than 3,000 people have been arrested in Beijing in the last month, and the *Beijing Morning Post* reported Saturday that police discovered 201 Falun Gong practitioners living illegally in rented rooms in the city during a mid-October sweep.