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**A statement by scholars  
concerned about  
the Sewol tragedy**

**PRESS RELEASE**  
For immediate release

May 13, 2014

**A statement is released by scholars concerned about the Sewol tragedy**

**S Korean Sewol ferry tragedy is a warning:  
The tragic accident is attributable to the government's neoliberal deregulation and  
the weakening of democracy in South Korea**

**1,074 signatories worldwide  
577 professors outside South Korea**

1. Professors and scholars whose primary place of work is outside South Korea release the following statement regarding the sinking of the Sewol at the National Press Club, Washington, DC on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014. The drive for signatures started on May 7<sup>th</sup> and ended at noon on the 12<sup>th</sup> (Eastern Time) on our website (<http://sewolscholars.weebly.com/>). The response from the academic community was overwhelming: 120 scholars from all over the world signed the statement within seven hours, and the total of 1,074 (including 577 professors) joined the signature drive before it ended. We believe this is the largest number of scholars signing a statement concerning a state of Korean affairs. This quick and broad participation demonstrates the depth of their rage and sorrow, and the South Korean government should take note of this sooner than later.
2. We find that the tragic sinking of the ferry was caused by not only the immoral and incapable crew but also the Park Geun-hye government's continued neoliberal policies that undermine the public safety. Also we determine that over two hundred passengers drowned to death due to the government's failure to handle the crisis and organize a rescue operation in a timely and responsible manner. Therefore, we demand the following:
  - The survivors, the victims, and their families must be provided with medical care, adequate healing, and proper compensation.
  - The government must own up to its responsibility for the Sewol tragedy, mindful that it is the most fundamental responsibility of the government, including the president, that it protects the life and safety of the people.
  - An independent special prosecutor must be appointed and a special act must be adopted to investigate the causes of the tragedy and prosecute those who are responsible.
  - Neoliberal deregulation must be repealed, and regulations on safety and public interest must be strengthened.
  - The government must stop its media control and censorship, and guarantee the freedom of press.
3. We ask you to spread our message so that similar tragedies may be prevented from occurring again in South Korea and everywhere in the world.

Scholars concerned about the Sewol tragedy

\*Attachment 1: Full statement

\*Attachment 2: Selected comments from scholars

\*Attachment 3: List of the signatories

**Attachment 1. Full Statement****The Sewol Ferry Tragedy as a Warning:  
Neoliberal Deregulation and Lack of Democratic Accountability in South Korea**  
May 7, 2014

We express our deepest sorrow and condolence for the families of the victims and Danwon High School students who have lost their loved ones in the sinking of the Sewol Ferry on April 16th. We sincerely hope that the missing passengers, whose death is not yet confirmed, return to their families as soon as possible.

The tragedy of the Sewol Ferry sank the heart of not only the Koreans but also everyone in the world to the deepest of shock and grief, as the world helplessly watched hundreds of lives drown to death because of the combination of corruption, ineptitude, and irresponsibility pervasive in today's Korea. The ferry sank under the weight of deregulation and privatization: the previous administration relaxed the regulations on a ferry's life and safety, allowing the Chonghaejin Maritime Transportation, the Sewol's owner, to import an aged ship and add more room for passengers and cargos; the safety inspection and the certification of the ship were left to private entities formed or heavily influenced by ferry owners; the Park administration allowed the Chonghaejin to hire temporary workers, including the captain, at a low wage and without adequate safety training; and the government turned a blind eye to the illegal overloading of the ferry. Throughout the tragedy, not only did the Park Geun-Hye administration fail to mobilize its resources to rescue the passengers in a timely manner: the Coast Guard never issued an order to rescue the passengers, but only a call to salvage the ferry; and it relied on a particular private company for the rescue and salvage, and protected the company's monopolistic operation. The Park Geun-Hye administration also walked away from democratic accountability by abandoning its responsibility to protect the people, systematically controlling the media, and mobilizing the police to isolate and surveillance the victims' families. Many Koreans, watching the government's betrayal, began to raise serious questions about whether they could trust the current government with their lives.

We, the undersigned academics and scholars, share Koreans' sense of governance crisis in South Korea. Compelled by a sense of urgency that a similar tragedy can occur again unless the problems exposed by the tragedy are immediately and adequately addressed, we demand the following:

**1. The survivors, the victims, and their families must be provided with medical care, adequate healing, and proper compensation.**

The Sewol tragedy is bound to leave indelible wounds on the survivors and the families of the victims. Instead of providing the needed support for them, however, the Korean government has mobilized the police to block the families' protest against its slow rescue operation and sent undercover policemen for the surveillance of the families. The government must offer all the care and support required to help them heal their wounds and try to resume their lives. Those responsible for the tragedy must compensate the survivors, the victims, and their families because a just compensation is required not only for their recovery but also for social justice.

**2. The government must own up to its responsibility for the Sewol tragedy, mindful that it is the most fundamental responsibility of the government, including the president, that it protects the life and safety of the people.**

Article 34 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea clearly states, “The state must endeavor to prevent disasters and protect the people from their danger.” While the immediate cause of the Sewol’s accident might be attributable to the captain and the owner of the ship, the government bears the most direct responsibility for saving not a single passenger who was left in the ferry. Ten years ago, then Representative Park Geun-Hye criticized President Roh Moo-Hyun for failing to protect Kim Sunil, who defied the government’s travel ban to go to Iraq on a proselytization mission and was killed by an extremist group: “Seeing the government fail to protect the citizen's life and safety - a failure of its most basic responsibility - the people became outraged at its incompetency and irresponsibility and began to have a fundamental doubt about the government.” We hold President Park to her own words. She must stop blaming others for her failure, own up to her responsibility, and sincerely apologize to the victims’ families. Top officials, including ministers, at Ministry of Security and Public Administration, Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, and Coast Guard, must be investigated and punished for their failure to fulfil the duty to protect the people’s life. President Park and the Presidential Office must tell the people how they are going to take the responsibility for failing to direct and oversee them.

**3. An independent special prosecutor must be appointed and a special act must be adopted to investigate the causes of the tragedy and prosecute those who are responsible.**

We agree with the victims’ families that it is imperative to form an independent special prosecutor and adopt a special act to investigate the causes of the Sewol tragedy. Since the Park government is directly implicated in this, prosecutors under President Park’s order cannot conduct an independent and thorough investigation. They have failed before: they could not investigate the full extent to which the Korean Intelligence Service, the military and other administrative agencies interfered in the election that had elected President Park; and they colluded with the Korean Intelligence Service to fabricate evidence in an attempt to frame Yu Osong, a North Korean defector, as a spy for the North. Only an independent special prosecutor, who is given the Korean people’s mandate to get to the bottom of the incident without worrying about the government’s influence, therefore can summon not just the crew members who are at the bottom of the power hierarchy but also the rich and the powerful, including the relevant ministers and President, and reveal their failures. Those found guilty must receive the maximum punishment allowed under the law so as to restore justice and serve as a warning for the future. The Sewol investigation should not be used as a blanket with which to cover the election interference and the recent spy fabrication case, but rather add the urgency to investigate them as fully.

**4. Neoliberal deregulation must be repealed, and regulations on safety and public interest must be strengthened.**

Just as neoliberalism has clearly betrayed its limits around the globe, so does the Sewol incident tragically demonstrate the dangers of rampant deregulation and privatization that place

corporate profits before the public interest and safety. An interest group that regards the people as a tool of economic gain and promotes deregulation and privatization under the name of efficiency cannot be called a government. We are appalled that amidst the Sewol chaos the Park administration restarted the Kori Nuclear Reactor that had been stopped over concerns about safety. Restarting the Kori Reactor, which generates only 1% of Korea's electricity, is not just taking the same fatal missteps as letting the Sewol sail to the passengers' peril, but represents a more serious threat to the nation and the region. The current government has set the quantitative goal of reducing all economic regulations by 20%, and is vigorously working to accomplish it. President Park must reverse the dangerous policy of wholesale deregulation and privatization that she has prioritized, and place the people's life and the quality of life before business profits and government convenience. The Sewol tragedy brings home the necessity to shift Korea's profit-driven paradigm to a people-centered one.

#### **5. The government must stop its media control and censorship, and guarantee the freedom of press.**

A victim's father clearly identified one of the problems: "I still think that there would have been survivors if the media had reported a little more factually and a little more critically from day one on." The government has systematically worked to control the media for fear that the government should be held responsible. Immediately after the Sewol's sinking, the government misled the public by announcing that all the passengers had been rescued, an announcement that was dutifully relayed by the media. Korea Communications Commission created a task force that would monitor media coverage and internet postings and "coordinate and control" - later changed to "request cooperation" - broadcasters in order to de facto censor the media and manipulate public opinion. The brazenness of the government's media control is reflected in the fact that Korea Communications Standards Commission is seeking to penalize Son Sukhee, a TV anchor, for conducting an interview with Lee Jongin who had offered a rescue method different from that of the private salvage company backed by the government. Also the government has impeded the free flow of information and opinions in the internet by intervening in various internet media. The Park government must immediately stop all its endeavors to oppress the freedom of press that is so central to liberal democracy.

**Attachment 2: Selected comments from scholars**

“I appreciate your pointing out the human cost of neoliberalism in this context.”  
Norma Field (Professor, University of Chicago)

“My deepest condolences to all who are affected by this tragedy. I reach out in solidarity to those who have rightly pointed out that the underlying cause of the disaster was nothing less than the failure of governance.”  
Takashi Fujitani (Professor, University of Toronto)

“I suggest members of the South Korean government identify with this issue by imagining their feelings if a tragedy like this were to happen to their own children on such a school trip.”  
Hancox, Richard (Professor, Concordia University, Montreal)

“How can I tell my friends to visit South Korea if even the most fundamental safety awareness is virtually nonexistent at governmental level?...It is a grave matter because you may have teenage relatives that may underestimate the lack of safety while travelling in South Korea.”  
Shu, Shinla (Postdoc/Researcher, National University of Singapore)

“Stop deregulation and stop media control.”  
Lee, Seung-Joon (Professor, National University of Singapore)

“I join this movement because I love Korea and Korean people. Please join it and speak out for the justice.”  
Park, Huiju (Professor, Cornell University)