

《韩国沉没客轮上有四名中国人》

韩国沉没客轮上有四名中国人

SEOUL - The Chinese embassy in South Korea has confirmed that four Chinese nationals were onboard the Sewol, which capsized off the South Korea's southwest coast on Wednesday.

As of Friday afternoon, 28 people have been confirmed dead, while 179 had been rescued and 268 others are still missing. The ship, traveling from Incheon to the southern resort island of Jeju, was carrying 475 passengers and crew.

Latest reports say that a sudden turn caused vehicles and shipping containers on board to throw the ship off balance. The reason for the turn has yet not been determined.

Missing Chinese citizens include a Chinese schoolgirl, a 39-year-old man and a 38-year-old woman. The man and the woman are a married couple, said China Central Television. The fourth one was a male passenger who had been working in South Korea.

A Chinese woman, who claimed to be a relative of the couple, said in South Korea that she was certain her sister and brother-in-law were on board. The couple, from the Korean ethnic group in Jilin province, were working in South Korea, Chinese media quoted the relative as saying.

She also showed pictures on her cellphone that she said were taken by the couple from the ferry. She said she received the pictures about 90 minutes before the accident.

According to the female relative, the two chose the ferry because they wanted to have a driving holiday in the southern resort island of Jeju, the ferry's destination.

Chinese authorities were seeking immediate clarification from South Korea concerning passengers still unaccounted for.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry asked South Korea on Thursday to check the information of missing Chinese citizens and find them as soon as possible.

The passengers aboard the sunken vessel included 325 high school students and 15 teachers who had been on the way for a four-day field trip. The ship departed from South Korea's western port city of Incheon Tuesday night for the southern resort island of Jeju.

Among the rescued, 75 were students from the Danwon High School in Ansan, a Seoul suburb. Almost 70 percent of those aboard were from the high school.

Rescue and probe development

Coast guard and navy divers succeeded Friday in entering into the hull of the ferry after they failed 20 times due to rapid currents, low underwater visibility and high waves.

The divers secured a path to the dining room of the submerged vessel, and found various passages to pry their way into the hull, local broadcaster YTN reported.

Kim Seok-kyun, head of the South Korean Coast Guard, told reporters that divers will go into the restaurant and compartments from 3 p.m. local time to search for possible survivors.

The divers succeeded in entering the hull for the first time Friday morning. Survivors have not been found yet. Air started to be pumped into the hull to offer air to possible survivors.

Three large salvage ships arrived at the scene Friday morning to pull the sunken ship out of the waters. A total of 535 coast guard and navy divers were working at the scene, and 31 airplanes and 173 rescue ships were sent for search operations.

The death toll was expected to rise as hundreds of passengers were still missing nearly two days after the 6,825-ton passenger ship, the Sewol, capsized and sank off Jindo Island, near the southwestern tip of the Korean Peninsula, at around 11:30 a.m. Wednesday. Most of the missing were believed to be trapped inside the sunken vessel.

The Coast Guard received the first distress call from an estimated student passenger of the ship at about 8:52 a.m. Wednesday, and the ship had remained afloat in the waters for about two and a half hours with its body tilting.

Prosecutors told a press briefing Friday morning that a third mate took the helm of the sunken ferry at the last minutes, noting testimonies on where the captain was when the ship was sinking have not been the same.

The police and prosecutors have been questioning rescued captain and crew members to figure out why the ship sank. The 69-year-old captain came back to the steering room after the ship began tilting, prosecutors said.

The ferry's sinking was believed to have been caused by a sudden turn in direction, which was executed at around 8:48 a.m. Wednesday according to the automatic identification system data offered by the South Korean Oceans and Fisheries Ministry.

The change in direction was believed to have moved some 180 cars and trucks and over 1,100 tons of shipping containers on the deck of the ship to one side, driving the ship to lean to the port side gradually.

The Sewol reportedly tilted first, rolled over on the port side and capsized before being totally submerged in the waters at around 11:30 a.m. Wednesday. It took around two and a half hours until the ship sank.

It was originally believed that the passenger ship might have run aground as some rescued passengers said they heard a thumping sound on the bow before the ship sinks.

The banging sound was estimated to be a noise made when the vehicles and containers were out of their place and crashed each other.

At the first stage, the ferry was believed to have veered off course as it departed some two and a half hours later than scheduled due to a heavy fog, but the oceans ministry said the ship was not far off its intended route.

Other rescued passengers said an announcement was made through the loudspeakers in the vessel warning them not to move as it would be dangerous. It was said to have raised the death toll as many passengers failed to escape from the vessel timely.

The ferry's regular captain who had been on leave was replaced by the substitute surnamed Lee, who the ship's operator Chonghaejin Marine claimed is a veteran with eight years of experience on the Incheon-Jeju Island route.

This is the second accident involving a Chonghaejin Marine vessel in three weeks. Another Chonghaejin ferry hit a 7.93-ton fishing boat on March 28 en route from Incheon to Baengnyeong Island in the West Sea. The 396-ton ship was carrying about 140 passengers and no injuries were reported in the accident.

