

37 perish in South Korean hospital blaze

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Seoul: A fire gutted the ground floor of a hospital in South Korea on Friday and sent toxic fumes raging through the six-storey building, killing at least 37 people and injuring 131 others in one of the country's deadliest blazes in a decade.

Authorities revised the death toll from 41, saying some victims were counted twice. Still, the toll could rise further as 18 of the injured were critical, an official was quoted as saying by Yonhap news agency.

Nearly 180 people were inside the Sejong Hospital in Miryang, 280 kilometres southeast of Seoul, when the fire broke out around 7.30 a.m. Witnesses said they first saw smoke coming from the hospital's emergency room or a dressing room for nurses next to it.

The fire completely burned the hospital's first floor. Smoke was seen billowing from windows on higher floors and most of the victims were believed to have died from inhaling toxic gas. The dead included one doctor and two nurses.

Firefighters brought the blaze under control around 9.30 a.m. and completely put it out about an hour later. The injured were sent to nearby hospitals.

The hospital consisted of two buildings -- one of them a general hospital with 95 beds and the other a nursing home with 98 beds. The fire broke out at the main hospital building. All inside the nursing home were safely evacuated.

The number of deaths was high as many of the victims were elderly who had difficulty moving around. At press briefing, the hospital's Chairman Son Kyung-chul said sprinklers were not installed in the building due to its small size.

President Moon Jae-in called for swift measures to minimize damage from the fire. Prime Minister Lee Nak-yon travelled to the site and called for a thorough investigation.

Lee also offered an apology, saying that the government promised to take steps to prevent such a disaster from happening again after a fire at a sports centre in Jecheon city killed 29 people last month.

The Interior and Safety Ministry said they dispatched an interagency team of officials to the site to help cope with the aftermath of the disaster.

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