

Beat: Travel

South Korea ends search for missing from Sewol ferry disaster

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USPA News - The search for nine people who remain missing after the Sewol ferry sinking earlier this year was called off Tuesday over increasing safety concerns, ending a seven-month-long recovery operation. The April sinking resulted in the deaths of 301 people on board and two rescue divers.

The decision to end the recovery operation came after Prime Minister Chung Hong-won chaired a meeting with government ministers on Tuesday morning. The prime minister's office said there were increasing safety concerns for the divers involved due to a combination of bad weather and the possibility of collapsing hull compartments. "As the search prolonged for a long term, the chance of discovering missing people has become slim while rescuers have voiced safety risks," Oceans and Fisheries Minister Lee Ju-young was quoted as saying by the Yonhap news agency. "The government decided that the underwater search has reached its limit." Rescue personnel at the scene will wrap up their operations and seal off the shipwreck to prevent the possible loss of bodies. A decision on when to salvage the ship will be made at a future date. Lee, speaking at a press conference on Tuesday, apologized to the families of the nine people who still remain missing. "I am very regretful and sorry for falling short of my promise not to stop until the last person is found. All the responsibility for failing to find the nine people lies with me, and I again repeat my apology," he said, as quoted by Yonhap. Tuesday's announcement came just weeks after divers recovered the body of a girl, bringing the number of people unaccounted-for down to nine. The 6,825-ton MV Sewol ferry sank on April 16 en-route from Incheon to the southern resort island of Jeju, killing 301 of the 476 people on board the vessel. The government's initial response to the disaster was widely criticized as slow and unorganized, with early reports claiming that everyone on board - most of them students on a school trip - had been rescued. Prime Minister Chung Hong-won, who was booed and had a bottle of water thrown at him the day after the disaster, tendered his resignation in late April, saying that the screams of the families of the victims were keeping him up at night. President Park Geun-hye accepted the resignation but said Chung would stay on until after the situation settles down. The Sewol ferry sinking marked South Korea's worst maritime disaster since the sinking of the Namyong ferry in December 1970, killing more than 320 people. The sinking of the ferry Seohae near Wido island in Jeolla province in October 1993 resulted in the deaths of 292 passengers and crew.

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