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A MARITIME ACCIDENT IN KING GEORGE ISLAND

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Seven of the eight Korean scientists who had been missing in the early December 2003 off the coast of King George Island were rescued by Russian and Chilean rescue teams after up to 50 hours of their missing. Unfortunately one was drowned to death.

On December 6th, six Koreans were returning to the King Sejong Station on two rubber boats (Zodiac), after sending off 24 colleagues returning home by a Chilean C-130, including 16 who had finished a year of service at the station. One hour after the departure from the Chilean Frei Base, the first boat carrying three people returned to the base, but the second boat with three others went missing. The missing group last contacted the base at around 20:30 (UTC) on Dec 6th, saying they were heading for nearby Chinese base due to a heavy snowstorm which abruptly developed during their returning.

King Sejong station immediately alerted all other nearby stations to search and rescue the missing people. As all various efforts to contact the missing Zodiac by radio turned out to be helpless, the Uruguayan vessel *Vanguadia* started a search in the Maxwell Bay. Soon after a Chilean warship joined the search. Weather condition became worse. Snowstorm lashed the area with maximum wind velocity of 18-20 meters per second during the search. At 04:45 on Dec 7th, *Vanguadia* discontinued the searching operation due to the unfavorable weather condition with low visibility of less than a half mile. Next morning on Dec 7th, the searching operation resumed, and at around 11:00 the Argentine National Antarctic Patrol vessel, *Castillo*, arrived at Maxwell bay, and joined the searching operation. Later on Dec 8th, a Russian supplier also joined the search. In addition, an IAATO tour ship, *Akademik Sergey Vavilov* remained at the King Sejong Station in the difficult weather conditions for 2 days and assisted the searching and rescue operation. Numbers of people from the Chinese, Chilean, Russian, Uruguayan, Argentine and Brazilian bases were helping out with the search on both sea and land.

At 11:30 on Dec 7th, King Sejong station received a weak radio signal from the missing Zodiac saying that they had landed on the ground and were waiting for rescue,

but soon the radio contact was cut off likely owing to the discharged battery of their radio and/or bad weather. At around 21:00 on Dec 7th, as the snowstorm was clearing off, the King Sejong dispatched a five-member search and rescue team (1 Zodiac driver, 1 GPS navigator, 1 doctor and 2 assistants), but within a couple of hours the five was also lost. Their last message (23:50 on Dec 7th) was that their boat was capsized near the Ardley Island owing to bad weather. Jae-Kyu Jeon, a 27-year-old geologist, was drowned to death at the boat accident. He was in charge of operating GPS. When the boat was flipped over near the coast of the Ardley Island, he was looking into the GPS. At the right moment of capsizing, he was flung far away from the boat. The rest people tried to rescue him, but could not reach him due to high waves.

The four survivors managed to swim ashore, but their bodies were frozen to the bone and paralyzed. After two hours of struggling, they reached to a Chilean refuge, and stayed the night until they were rescued the next morning (13:00 on Dec 8th) by a Russian rescue team. Without the refuge, they could not have survived. The first three men landed on Nelson Island were found and rescued by a Chilean helicopter in the evening (23:20 on Dec 8th) after about 50 hour of their missing.

Korean government examined the exact causes of the accident, as it was the first of its kind since the King Sejong Station was established in 1988. Analysts said that the main cause of this incident is the abrupt weather change. When the first missing boat set out from the Frei base; the weather was fine, favorable for boat operation; wind was less than 10 meters per second, and visibility was more than 20 km. While returning to the base, however, weather took a violent turn, with a fierce snowstorm lashing the area. Maximum wind velocity reached 18-20 meters per second, and visibility dropped down to less than a mile within less than an hour. Five others on the second boat met the same fate in the rescue mission the next day.

Korean government plans to strengthen safety measures to prevent this kind of tragedy from reoccurring. As an initial step, Korea Polar Research Institute (KOPRI) that is in charge of the national Antarctic operation already replaced two rubber boats with state of the art navigation system and upgraded radio communication system at both boats and base and will continue to reinforce safety procedure at the base. KOPRI is also going to strengthen Training Program on safety and emergency response.

On behalf of Korean government I would like to express sincere appreciation for the unsparing search and rescue efforts exerted by the countries on King George Island (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, China, Russia, and Uruguay).