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Fire at hospital for elderly kills 21 in latest major South Korea accident

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SEOUL (Reuters) - A fire at a rural South Korean hospital for chronically ill elderly patients on Wednesday killed 21 people and injured eight in the second major fire this week as the country still mourns victims of a ferry disaster last month.

The midnight blaze at the hospital in the southwest region of Jeolla was put out relatively quickly, but most of the victims were elderly patients unable to walk or move freely, leading to the large number of casualties, fire officials said.

All the victims were on the second floor of one building, and most of them suffered smoke inhalation, a local fire department official said by telephone.

The hospital held patients who required long-term care, many with dementia or disability as a result of a stroke, local media reports said.

South Korea, Asia's fourth-largest economy and a leading manufacturing powerhouse, has developed into a vibrant and technically advanced democracy, but it faces criticism that regulatory controls and safety standards have not kept pace.

The country is mourning the deaths of more than 300 people who drowned when a heavily overloaded ferry capsized and sank on April 16, the country's worst maritime disaster in 20 years.

A fire at a large shopping mall complex killed eight people on Monday when smoke and toxic fumes spread rapidly. Fire screens designed to stop the spread of fire and smoke did not function in the relatively new building.

There have since been two subway accidents that left nearly 200 people injured.

(Reporting by Ju-min Park and [Jack Kim](#); Editing by [Cynthia Osterman](#))

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