

Flowers are no match for a typhoon

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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Taiwan is no stranger to extreme weather. The 2001 typhoon season, which lasted from about May to December, comes to mind. That was the year Typhoon Nari did a U-turn as it headed toward Okinawa, parked over open water to gain strength and finally inundated Taiwan as it slowly drifted southward. It was the seventh of nine typhoons to hit Taiwan that year, striking just two months after Typhoon Toraji caused flash floods in Hualien, Taitung and Nantou counties that killed more than 200 people and caused nearly NT\$7.7 billion (US\$240.2 million) in agricultural and infrastructure damage.

Torrential rains brought by Nari caused roughly NT\$2.9 billion in damage and claimed 100 lives, with most of the fatalities taking place in and around Taipei City. The city's MRT system was severely damaged because of flooding, with entire lengths of track completely submerged. Parts of the system were down for as long as six months and it took millions of dollars to clean up the mess.

Then, just over a year ago, Typhoon Morakot struck southern Taiwan, doing more damage than any typhoon in the nation's history. The category-1 storm killed more than 800 people, burying whole villages in mountainous areas of Kaohsiung County under tonnes of rock and mud, cut off towns and destroyed bridges. The fiscal hit was huge — more than US\$6 billion in damage. A year later, affected families are still trying to cope with the aftermath, with many forced to relocate to areas without jobs and others mourning the loss of loved ones.

Against this backdrop of growing climactic disaster in Taiwan, the sheer scale of the global weather crisis has been particularly notable this year.

Flooding in Pakistan has been so bad that nearly 20 million people have been affected. World Bank and UN officials say that the international aid trickling in is nowhere near enough for the monumental task of helping millions of flood-affected families.

Indian Kashmir has also been hit with flash floods this year that have killed hundreds in the heavily visited area of Ladakh. On the other side of the Himalayas, in China, July floods triggered landslides in Sichuan and Gansu Provinces that took out high-rise buildings and resulted in the deaths of hundreds. The flooding of the Yalu River, which demarcates the border between China and North Korea, destroyed crops in a country that faced a devastating famine in the 1990s, forcing "dear leader" Kim Jong-il to once again beg for food aid from his large neighbor to the north.

With all these weather-induced crises, it is not unreasonable to ask how well prepared Taipei City is. Worryingly, it turns out that the city is spending its emergency funds on flowers, and dubiously priced flowers at that.

On July 19, Taipei City Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Councilor Wu Su-yao (吳蘇瑯) accused the city of spending more than 70 percent, or NT\$500 million, of its secondary reserve

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fund — to be used in case of emergency — on preparations for the Taipei International Flora Expo. That is on top of the NT\$9 billion already being spent on the expo.

DPP Taipei City Councilor Hsu Chia-ching (許家正) added that the city government had better pray there are no emergencies or disasters in the second half of this year, because it has no money to deal with any unforeseen eventualities.

Although it has been a relatively storm-free typhoon season this year, it is not over yet. It seems a dangerous gamble to bet all of the city's emergency money on flowers while crossing one's fingers and hoping no major typhoons hit the Taipei area.

Unfortunately, Taipei Mayor Hau lung-bin (郝龍斌) is only now beginning to wake up and smell the crisis he helped create.

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