

Finding the courage to face Morakot

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The 10th anniversary on Monday of the 921 Earthquake, one of the nation's worst natural disasters, was a day to recall both the tragedy and the heroic rescue efforts that followed. Images run by TV and newspapers from the catastrophe that claimed more than 2,400 lives brought back the pain and fear of the days following the disaster as the extent of the death and destruction became apparent.

The sadness on this year's anniversary was compounded by fresh suffering in the wake of Typhoon Morakot. In the weeks after Morakot swept over Taiwan on the weekend of Aug. 7, the death toll steadily climbed and is now more than 700. But in addition to the lives lost, entire communities are struggling to clean up mud, rocks and deadwood brought by violent rains that exceeded more than the average precipitation for an entire year. Farmers are at a loss on how to start over, with many fish farmers unsure if they will qualify for subsidies because their farms were unlicensed — operating illegally while authorities turned a blind eye.

After the magnitude 7.3 quake struck on Sept. 21, 1999, the government and military responses were swift. But recovery in the wake of a disaster of that scale is a slow process, as Morakot has reminded us. Praise must go to those who worked not just to scour and pull the injured from the rubble of the quake, but also to the long-term efforts that went into rebuilding lives, homes and communities.

Comparisons between the 921 Earthquake and Morakot are unavoidable, mainly because of the extent of the devastation caused by the two disasters and because people today so vividly remember the deadly temblor.

The government's slow response to Morakot left tens of thousands in the disaster zone feeling shocked and helpless. The public anger that swelled to the point of compelling a Cabinet reshuffle remains.

While the resentment is justified, it will be important over the next few years to maintain a public discussion about the disaster that is not limited to political fallout. Even so, Morakot has the potential to be a deciding factor in the year-end regional elections.

If the nation hopes to come out of Morakot safer and better prepared for catastrophe than it was before, the debate must focus on a number of points: improving the government's disaster response; spending reconstruction funds efficiently and transparently; seeking a fair solution for communities whose homes were destroyed or are no longer safe; and implementing sustainable development.

None of these goals will be easy, and already many Aboriginal villages are concerned that any solution the government offers will have negative effects for their communities, and by extension the preservation of their identity and culture.

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Achieving sustainable development, meanwhile, seems impossible given the track record of the nation's leaders — both in the administration of President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) and previous governments. Sustainable development will require major economic reforms, including scaling down mountain agriculture and fish farms to counteract mudslides and land subsidence. It will also involve major investment in improving infrastructure, while projects such as the expansion of the Zengwun Reservoir may have to be scrapped.

As we reflect on the nation's recovery in the decade since the 921 temblor — which was no small feat — it is clear that Taiwan can recover from this disaster, too. It is, however, a daunting task that will take years, and the public must demand substantial improvements of its government if Taiwan is to emerge from this tragedy.

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