

KMT 'reconstruction' is ruining Taiwan's land

Written by Taiwan News Editorial
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On the eve of the first anniversary of the "August Eight Flood Disaster" triggered by Typhoon Morakot, over a thousand indigenous people from disaster areas in southern Taiwan held a dramatic "sleep-in" protest on Taipei's Ketagalan Boulevard to protest the drive of the Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang) government to force them to leave their home villages and divide their communities.

After massive floods and landslides swept away over 700 lives, a public outcry over the manifest failure of the KMT government in carrying out the essential tasks of disaster rescue and relief with speed and effectiveness led to the resignation of ex-premier Liu Chao-hsuan and a precipitous plunge in the satisfaction ratings of Ma's approval ratings from which the president has yet to recover.

The experience of the past year has revealed just how little the Ma government has learned from this disaster and has fully exposed the shortcomings of the reconstruction effort carried out under the authority of a "Special Statute for Post-Disaster Reconstruction after the August 8 Typhoon Morakot Disaster" that was rushed through the Legislative Yuan in just 20 days.

As predicted, the special statute reflected the ruling party's bureaucratic and top-down administrative habits and paved the way for a second man-made disaster for hard-hit indigenous communities in Kaohsiung, Pingtung, Tainan and Taitung Counties.

Despite unprecedented powers granted to the Cabinet - level "Post-Morakot Reconstruction Commission" to set aside budgetary restrictions and even environmental impact assessments, the legislative caucus of the opposition Democratic Progressive Party reported last week that 304 or 17.2 percent of the 1,770 earmarked reconstruction projects had not even been started and another 538 or 30.4 percent had failed to achieve 50 percent completion.

According to data collected by the Cabinet-level Post-Typhoon Morakot Reconstruction Commission, only 7,484 of the 19,191 persons dislocated by the typhoon and its attendant floods have been resettled and 11,707 remain in dangerous areas.

Such a display of administrative inefficiency surely merits attention from the Control Yuan and

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its Ministry of Audit if not some of Taiwan's zealous prosecutors.

What may even be worse are the consequences of what the government has actually "accomplished," especially in the field of resettlement of indigenous peoples in disaster areas in Kaohsiung, Pingtung and Taitung Counties.

In particular, indigenous victims and activists slammed the government's policy of reducing or cutting off reconstruction funds and assistance for indigenous people who remain or who wish to rebuild communities in "special zones" deemed to be dangerous.

This policy has created grave dilemmas for indigenous victims and fostered divisions in indigenous communities and even households in direct contradiction to the needs of victims for the rebuilding of their communities.

This policy has carried out under the Article 20 of the special reconstruction statute which allows the government to "delineate special zones, restrict residence or engage in compulsory relocation of homes or villages through consultation with indigenous residents."

This statute contravenes the constitutional right of freedom of residence (Article 10) and the Indigenous Peoples Basic Law which affirms that "the government recognizes the land rights and natural resources rights of indigenous people" (Article 20).

Indigenous community deconstruction

Moreover, numerous indigenous community leaders and activists testified at the demonstration and related seminars that "consultative meetings" held with indigenous people on relocation plans took the form of "explanation" meetings to individual indigenous citizens to announce the government's arbitrary decisions and ways of compliance.

In contrast to the community focussed recovery efforts after the September 21, 1999

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earthquake, what has not occurred is equal consultation with existing indigenous village assemblies or community organizations on alternatives, such as relocation of indigenous villages to original historical locations prior to Japanese or KMT occupation, which were unaffected by the disaster.

Indigenous community leaders maintain that such methods constitute effective form of forcible relocation that violates Article 10 of the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples which mandates that "indigenous peoples shall not be forcibly removed from their lands or territories" and that "no relocation shall take place without the free, prior and informed consent of the indigenous peoples concerned and after agreement on just and fair compensation and, where possible, with the option of return."

It is therefore not surprising that the Indigenous Peoples Action Coalition of Taiwan has launched a drive to denounce to the U.N. the Ma government for violating the human rights of Taiwan's indigenous peoples.

For its part, after over two years in office with a 70 percent legislative majority, the KMT government has failed to pass national land recovery legislation that could help address Taiwan's ecological crises and vulnerabilities to "natural disasters" by commercial development in sensitive mountain and coastal lands and that would also respect the land rights and traditions of indigenous peoples.

Indeed, President Ma has ignored the KMT's own responsibility for leaving Taiwan ecologically vulnerable thanks to decades of "growth first" policies and years of legislative boycotts against progressive draft national land planning and national land recovery legislation submitted by the former DPP government aimed at beginning to repair the damage.

This sorry record makes quite clear just who is "ruining" Taiwan's land.

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