

Relocation worse than Morakot, Aborigines claim

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The government's reconstruction policy after Typhoon Morakot struck in August last year was a far bigger disaster than the natural calamity because it is leading to the extinction of Aborigines, Lituan Takilulu, convener of the Indigenous Peoples Action Coalition of Taiwan, said yesterday.

"Aborigines will never be able to return home. They are compelled to live in separate places. We are on our way to extinction," Lituan said at a forum held by the Taiwan Association of University Professors on the eve of the first anniversary of Morakot.

Lituan, a Rukai priest, said Aborigines are not scared of natural disasters, because "disasters are part of the lives of Aborigines," adding that the most important problem facing Aborigines was that "people are dispersed" and "connections with fellow tribe members are cut off."

About 72 percent, or 13,911, of the 19,191 people in 6,316 households were living in areas deemed "unsafe" by the government after it investigated 291 sites in the wake of the catastrophe. Of these, 7,484 people in 2,433 households resettled in permanent houses, while 11,707 in 3,883 households remained at their original place of residence.

Government officials cited statistics to rebut allegations of forced relocation while continuing to reason with Aborigines to move out of their mountain villages, saying that "migration is the best way to avoid the consequences of climate change," as President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) has said.

Lituan said Aboriginal victims were compelled to leave their hometown within one week of the typhoon and asked to decide within a short period whether to resettle in permanent houses.

"More than 80 percent of Aboriginal victims signed up for permanent houses, [but did so] when they had no idea about the conditions in their villages. Some tribe members then found safe places in their villages and wanted to go back, but they were not allowed to," Lituan said.

There also was no financial support for Aborigines who wished to rebuild their homes in their original villages, he said.

"Some people borrowed money from friends to buy land to resettle," Lituan said.

The government's reconstruction policy was to force Aborigines to relocate in permanent houses, which not only made Aborigines leave their lands, but will also compound the breakup of Aborigine families, he said.

If people establish their own families through marriage or other means, they can't live in the community, where the number of houses are limited, and must move out, becoming separated from their families, Lituan said.

Elan Pavavajung, a Paiwan tribe member who produced a documentary on how Aborigines

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living in Davalan, Sandimen Township (沙鹿), Pingtung County, dealt with the disaster, said older Aborigines blamed widespread deforestation and reforestation by the Forestry Bureau and road-widening for the catastrophe.

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