

MORAKOT: THE AFTERMATH: Officials agree: No state of emergency

Written by Taipei Times

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The daughter of a missing Taitung police officer, Chiang Wen-hsiang, stands at the side
PHOTO: CNA

The Legislative Yuan and the Executive Yuan yesterday decided against calling on the president to declare a state of emergency.

Legislative Speaker Wang Jin-pyng said after a meeting with Premier Liu Chao-shiuan and the three legislative caucuses that they believed the government could handle disaster and relief procedures based on the provisions listed in the Disaster Prevention and Protection Act.

Wang told reporters that the officials also agreed that there was no need for the Executive Yuan to file a special budget request for reconstruction because the Cabinet still has NT\$40 billion (US\$1.2 billion) at its disposal for relief work and reconstruction.

But the speaker said the Cabinet promised to have its subordinate organizations estimate the budget they need for reconstruction.

If the Cabinet decides to propose a special budget, legislators across party lines will hold an extraordinary session to complete the review within a short period, Wang said.

Speaking about the decision, Liu said: "At this stage, we don't think an emergency decree is necessary. We compared the emergency decree and the Disaster Prevention and Protection Act and found that the act already covers what is written in the decree."

The Act was promulgated after the Sept. 21 Earthquake in 1999.

Liu said he respected President Ma Ying-jeou's authority to choose to implement the decree or not.

Asked about mounting complaints that the government failed to act promptly to rescue

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victims, Liu said he did not agree.

“In contrast with the disaster relief after the 921 Earthquake, we acted swiftly this time. I didn't enter the earthquake-affected areas [as vice premier then] until Sept. 28 when comprehensive relief work was launched,” he said.

“It is unavoidable that there be complaints, and we will make improvements,” the premier said. “But overall, we have acted swiftly.”

“If you interview local commissioners, they would say the same thing,” Liu said.

Liu said that weather conditions impeded rescue efforts, and that delays were not the result of government not sending enough military personnel, equipment and vehicles.

Yang Chiung-ying, the secretary-general of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) caucus, said earlier yesterday the legislature was ready to hold an extraordinary session.

With the death toll from Typhoon Morakot rising and hundreds of people still stranded in areas wiped out by mudslides, lawmakers questioned President Ma Ying-jeou leadership and the government's disaster relief effort.

KMT Legislator Tsao Erh-chang said the whole administrative network should be dedicated to disaster relief, adding that the absence of senior government chiefs at disaster-hit areas was “unacceptable.”

KMT Legislator Lo Shu-lei said the president should have ordered full military involvement in disaster relief.

“I expect President Ma to exercise his power as commander-in-chief as soon as possible,” Lo said.

KMT caucus Legislator Lu Hsueh-chang said the government's disaster relief policy was problematic and should be reviewed.

Democratic Progressive Party Legislator Chen Ting-fei questioned Ma's leadership, saying that only about 8,000 soldiers had been mobilized since the typhoon struck.

Huang Huang-hui, vice chancellor of Cheng Kung University in Tainan, told the KMT Central Standing Committee the only way to get the government to understand the situation would be to flood the Presidential Office.

Ma said yesterday that the Executive Yuan would decide today whether to request a special budget for disaster relief.

Visiting Cishan Township in Kaohsiung County, Ma said government agencies had been assessing the potential cost of reconstruction. If current budgets were not enough, Ma said the

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Cabinet could enact an extraordinary decree to request a special budget.

Unlike Tuesday, when petitioners were blocked by police and bodyguards, the families of victims were able to approach Ma and tell their stories.

While some held up a banner reading "Retarded government, cold-blooded murderers," a tearful grandmother spoke about losing her fish farm, telling Ma she had no fish to sell and "would die" because she owed a lot of money.

Another woman cried out: "President Ma, please help," while another asked Ma to distribute money as soon as possible.

Ma acknowledged the severity of the destruction caused by Morakot, but said it was unnecessary to declare a state of emergency.

"I am not saying that the situation is not serious. It is very serious," he said.

Ma said the government declared a state of emergency after the 921 Earthquake in 1999. The decree covered 11 issues, which were later enshrined in the Disaster Prevention and Protection Act, which sanctions the recruitment of private sector resources and simplifies administrative procedures.

"As the law is applicable to minor and major disasters, we don't have to declare a state of emergency when disaster strikes," he said.

While victims' families criticized the rescue efforts as too slow, Ma said the rescue mission would continue, weather permitting, adding that the government must evacuate and had the right to evacuate residents against their will.

He also asked Kaohsiung County Commissioner Yang Chiu-hsing to help evacuees find housing and consider subsidizing their rental fees.

Compensation for agricultural losses will be made in accordance with the Agricultural Natural Disaster Relief Regulations, he said, and could be dealt with on a case-by-case basis if reimbursements are insufficient.

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