

MORAKOT: THE AFTERMATH : MOFA sorry, but denies mistake over refusing aid

Written by Taipei Times
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The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) yesterday apologized for a leaked memo that instructed overseas representative offices to decline all offers of foreign aid and rescue workers except for cash donations, but Acting Minister Andrew Hsia insisted that the blunder was carelessness, not a “mistake” as reported by the media.

Hsia said the memo “neglected” to say that Taiwan was only “temporarily” refusing foreign aid, adding that MOFA’s standing policy has always been that Taiwan would seek international assistance if needed.

Hsia said: “The memo dealt with instructing foreign countries how to donate money for relief efforts. Perhaps it was a technical error on our part, but we should have phrased the memo in such a way that it said that we were only ‘temporarily’ declining donations of goods and rescue workers.”

Media reports alleged that Hsia was not the final MOFA official to sign off on the memo, but Hsia yesterday refused to disclose the name of the final person who signed off, saying only that while Minister of Foreign Affairs Francisco Ou was abroad, he was in charge.

As acting minister, Hsia said he would shoulder responsibility and was willing to accept punitive actions for any oversight.

Hsia also defended the Presidential Office and Executive Yuan, saying that the Cabinet was not informed of the memo.

The memo was dated Aug. 11, three days after Typhoon Morakot devastated southern Taiwan, leaving hundreds dead or missing and thousands stranded.

On Tuesday, the ministry told reporters that Taiwan could cope with the aftermath of the typhoon on its own and rejected all foreign assistance except monetary donations.

The comments caused a public uproar, and the ministry was condemned as being apathetic and money hungry.

On Thursday, the ministry made an about-face, issuing a wish list of items the country needed for rescue efforts to various countries.

At a separate setting yesterday, Presidential Office Spokesman Wang Yu-chi, in response to the MOFA announcement on Tuesday refusing all foreign assistance, said the Presidential Office and the Executive Yuan had no knowledge of the memo. President Ma Ying-jeou had asked Ou to look into the issue immediately upon his return, and told him to discipline those who were involved, Wang said.

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Wang's remarks yesterday contradicted previous comments in which he was quoted by the -Chinese-language United Daily News as saying on Wednesday that the Presidential Office respected the ministry's decision.

Meanwhile, legislators across party lines yesterday slammed the ministry for rejecting foreign aid.

Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) caucus whip Wang Sing-nan demanded Ou's resignation for declining foreign aid without first obtaining authorization from the Central Emergency Operation Center.

"[MOFA] made a mistake and then lied [about the memo]. Our rescue work would have been more successful and more lives could have been saved if we had asked for assistance from other nations earlier. Shouldn't the minister of foreign affairs step down [over this mishap]?" Wang said at a press conference.

Wang said Ma should also be held responsible for the memo because diplomacy is under the president's authority.

DPP Legislator Tsai Huang-liang said the government should apologize to family members of the flood victims and punish responsible personnel.

Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) Legislator Chiu Yi said Premier Liu Chao-shiuan had failed to supervise the ministry.

"Given the serious flooding and landslides, we should have accepted foreign aid if other nations were willing to offer help. Why did we idiotically decline their gestures?" Chiu asked. "This government is apathetic and insensitive."

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