

Nation rallies against Chiang-Chen talks

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The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) said more than 100,000 people flooded the streets of Taichung City yesterday to protest against the government's China-leaning policies on the eve of the fourth round of cross-strait negotiations since President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) took office in May last year.

Police denied the DPP claim that the protest attracted 100,000 people, saying there were only about 30,000.

Shouting slogans such as "Taiwan, China, two separate countries" and "Taiwan is an independent country," protesters from around the nation held up placards and giant banners calling for Ma's resignation because the "president has betrayed the country by selling out Taiwan to China," a farmer from Yunlin County said.

A full line-up of DPP heavyweights, such as party chairperson Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文), former premiers Frank Hsieh (許信良), Su Tseng-chang (蘇貞昌), and Yu Shyi-kun, Kaohsiung City Mayor Chen Chu (陳菊) and a number of DPP lawmakers, marched along the protesters.

"We are here to send a loud message to the Ma administration that Taiwanese people are the masters of this land and he has no right destroying the country's democratic system," said Tsai, while criticizing China for its "arrogant and oppressive" attitude toward Taiwan.

Speaking at the rally, Tsai dubbed Ma the root of Taiwan's problems and urged the administration to stop sabotaging the country's democracy by being over-friendly with China. She added that the government owes the public a clear explanation on its China policy.

The chairperson said that -despite the rosy promises made by the government on the signing of an economic cooperation framework agreement (ECFA), the pact will destroy Taiwan's economy, especially its agricultural sector, because the agreement would trigger a large influx of Chinese products to Taiwan tariff-free.

"Taiwan is already experiencing its highest unemployment rate ever. People are constantly worried about losing their jobs ... yet this government, which is made up of people from the privileged class, does not seem to care," she said, adding that the government's insistence on signing an ECFA with Beijing was anti-democratic because more than 80 percent of the public said they were not familiar with the content of the deal.

The protest was divided into two routes, with both processions converging later in the afternoon to form a massive rally. The DPP and pro-independence groups are also planning several protests during Chen's stay in Taiwan from today to Friday.

The main theme of the procession from the east end of the city was to "break the black box" (黑箱) — or break the non-transparency in policy-making decision process on cross-strait

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issues. The two parades joined together for a rally at about 5pm.

This is the second time Taiwan has hosted cross-strait talks headed by Taiwan's Straits Exchange Foundation Chairman Chiang Pin-kung (蔣經國) and his Chinese counterpart, Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait Chairman Chen Yunlin (陳雲林).

Chen is scheduled to arrive at the central city today via direct charter flight this morning. The two men are expected to meet and sign four agreements on fishing industry cooperation, quality control for agricultural products, cross-strait certification inspection and avoiding double taxation.

The two sides are slated to hammer out more details on the government's proposed ECFA, a hotly debated trade pact with Beijing that the government touts as the solution to increasing Taiwan's economic competitiveness in Asia.

The DPP, however, attacked the government as side-stepping the public's will by planning to sign the treaty without public consent, adding that the Ma administration has failed to be transparent in its dealings with China.

"I am very disappointed and heartbroken that Taiwan has a president who doesn't care about the Taiwanese people. If Ma likes China so much, he is welcome to go there and leave Taiwan alone," said Wang Ming-seng (王明生), a 70-year-old wheelchair bound former teacher from Chiayi County, who said he was determined to participate in the demonstration despite his poor health.

Eleven-year-old fifth grader Chou Ting-hui (周廷輝) from Tainan City, waving a green DPP flag, said he was walking "for Taiwan's freedom and his own future," adding that Chen was not welcome in Taiwan.

"Although I am just a boy, I am a Taiwanese who has the responsibility to protect Taiwan from being swallowed by Beijing. I want to tell Chen that he is not needed here and that Taiwan must not sign an ECFA with China," he said.

Braving the cold wind, -marchers made their way to the Windsor Hotel where the Chinese delegation was staying to demand its immediate -expulsion from Taiwan. The Taichung City Police Bureau fenced off the area around the hotel with barbed wire, drawing criticism from the protesters, who said Chen did not deserve such preferential treatment.

Police yesterday mobilized about 500 officers to maintain order at the protests.

The Taichung City Police Bureau said about 500 police officers would be on duty to maintain order and safety throughout the demonstration, including about 100 police who will be in charge of directing traffic and keeping road conditions and transportation running smoothly.

Police also blocked off certain roads with barricades, saying it was done to protect local residents.

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The National Police Agency said that, depending on the situation, it estimated about 300 to 1,000 police would be on duty to maintain order on each of the five days that Chen is in Taiwan.

Although the parade was mainly peaceful, a minor conflict occurred not long after the crowd departed.

A man taking part in the demonstration mistakenly thought a female making recordings in the parade was a Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) member trying to spy on the demonstration and tried to grab the voice recorder from her.

DPP security personnel quickly rushed to the scene to stop the clash.

The conflict ended peacefully soon after the man found that the woman was actually a DPP staffer.

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