

## Time to focus on people, not profits

Written by Lee Ken-cheng 李慶生

Monday, 11 August 2014 07:40

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Who exactly is responsible for the death and destruction in Greater Kaohsiung following the gas pipeline explosions on July 31 and Aug. 1? At present, all of the evidence points to LCY Chemical Corp, a company with a pretty dire environmental record.

The day after the blasts, as Greater Kaohsiung residents assessed the aftermath of the explosions, another accident occurred in Jiangsu Province, Kunshan, China. The explosion at Kunshan Zhongrong Metal Products, a company run by a Taiwanese businessman, resulted in almost 70 deaths.

These two fatal incidents, happening in close succession, are a source of shame for Taiwanese industry. However, the underlying causes did not develop overnight. These disasters are the consequence of pernicious business models, a lack of respect for the spirit of the law, and a collapse of moral standards observed by many Taiwanese companies.

For the past half-century, the Taiwanese government has gone all-out to promote the development of polluting heavy industry, removing all obstacles to investment and repeatedly relaxing existing regulations, even allowing the companies involved to take responsibility for maintaining the underground pipes through which they pumped hazardous petrochemicals.

All the Ministry of Economic Affairs (MOEA) was concerned about was expanding economies of scale and championing major corporations, irrespective of how grievous their track record, throughout the environmental impact assessment process and in the aftermath of major accidents that put the public at risk. The much-vaunted industrial restructuring over the past few decades has been one big scam, the chief beneficiaries of which have been these polluting, energy-intensive heavy industries.

All these corporate beasts offer in return, however, are explosions, toxic emissions, illegal discharging of waste water and pollution. Over the last few years, we have had reports of how the state-controlled CPC Corp, Taiwan discharged wastewater, quite illegally, on 55 separate occasions, and have heard of so many explosions and incidents of pollution that we have become desensitized to it.

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Companies in the private sector are no better, either. A few years ago, it was discovered that the groundwater beneath Formosa Plastics' petrochemical plant in Greater Kaohsiung's Renwu Township (仁武) had levels of certain toxins more than 302,000 times the legally allowed amount, and the company's naphtha cracker in Mailiao (麻里寮), Yunlin County, has had several explosions which affected the entire country.

Management at Advanced Semiconductor Engineering Inc (ASE) was found to have fabricated data and to have illegally discharged polluted waste water from its plant on 25 occasions over a three-year period.

These corporations have been raking in tens of billions of New Taiwan dollars with little or no regard for the environment, public safety, or the working conditions of their own employees, while society picks up the tab for their wanton behavior.

The company culture within many of these firms is astonishing. When several petrochemical companies are falling over each other trying to absolve themselves of blame for the explosions, we must not forget our own complicity. If we were to reduce these companies to individuals, the people at the top should have been locked up long ago and the key thrown away.

Yet these big corporations, culpable for a string of crimes and wrongdoings, have not been asked to pay a price proportionate to the mischief they have wrought. The reason for this is the links between government and business, the way this corrupts how the law and the economic system operate, and how it cultivates a bastardized corporate culture. Once again, bad money has been allowed to chase away the good, and any companies that take seriously their environmental and social responsibilities, or the welfare of their workers, are squeezed out, to the detriment of the country.

It is utterly astonishing that the Greater Kaohsiung Government, in charge of a city thick with petrochemical plants, was not able to determine, within the six hours leading up to the explosions — in which people reported the odor of gas, that it had a potential disaster on its hands.

Nobody — neither the local construction management office, nor the urban development

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office, nor the Environmental Protection Bureau, nor the fire department — knew the exact layout of the underground pipelines. When the city's fire department's second-in-command says the department had no idea where the pipelines were located before the explosions occurred, its bad.

When people demanded to know where other pipelines were laid, the ministry — which is responsible for all of the petrochemical industrial parks in Greater Kaohsiung — said it was only responsible for state-run companies and industrial parks, and that the underground piping running between individual industrial parks was under the jurisdiction of the city government.

When it said this, it was readily apparent how the government was prioritizing industrial development over the safety of the public. For the past half-century these industrial parks have operated as if they were separate concessions owned by the ministry and the big corporations, while the city around them has been treated as a second or third-class colony.

Twenty-five years ago, in response to resistance to the construction of Taiwan's No. 5 Naphtha cracker by Houjin (後勁) residents, former deputy minister of economic affairs Lee Mo (李模) made the trip to then-Kaohsiung to try to win residents' hearts.

"Economic development is a process, during the course of which there will be hardships that will need to be borne, and these will affect some more than others, depending on their role within this process," he said.

Well, the residents of Greater Kaohsiung are not going to take it anymore. The government/business cabal's days of lining their own pockets are numbered, and the time for restitution of historical justice for the city's residents has arrived.

It is time there was a comprehensive debate about the development of the petrochemical industry in this country. The CPC Kaohsiung plant should be closed in 2015, as the government has promised it would be, and the Dashe Petrochemical Industrial Park, where the LCY Chemical plant is located, is due for closure in 2018.

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The central government should now invest in industrial restructuring and create an environment more suitable for people to live and work in safety, and the Greater Kaohsiung Government can no longer prevaricate on its development policy, saying on one hand that it will create a pleasant city to live in, while on the other, continuing to tolerate and support the expansion of polluting heavy industry.

We cannot allow the people who died in this latest disaster to have done so in vain. The government must give the citizens and land in Greater Kaohsiung their just dues, and the next generation hope.

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Translated by Paul Cooper

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