

The gas pipeline explosions on July 31 and Aug. 1 in Greater Kaohsiung that killed 30 people, injured 310 and left a neighborhood devastated was a tragedy, but a press conference held by President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) discussing the disaster was also tragic.

Since the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) regime relocated to Taiwan, economic development has been industry-driven, with the creation of labor-intensive manufacturing zones, the “homes as factories” policy, petrochemical industrial zones, science parks and industrial parks.

The development strategy succeeded in boosting the economy, creating Taiwan’s so-called “economic miracle.”

However, the “miracle” was not a miracle at all. The economic success was achieved at the expense of the environment, the agricultural sector, self-sustainability in food and the public’s health and safety.

With economic achievement as the paramount goal, factories quickly took over farmland, either through regular purchases or expropriation. Government authorities turned a blind eye to factories releasing unprocessed waste and to industrial use of water being given priority over agricultural or residential use. Exceptions would, from time to time, be made on environmental or labor regulations for industrial development, forcing workers or residents near industrial plants to suffer from pollution and disease.

The explosions in Greater Kaohsiung are the latest example of how the government’s focus on economic development has sacrificed lives.

Yet during his press conference, Ma only briefly spoke about a desire to see the public and politicians of all parties stand together to deal with the aftermath of the blasts and reconstruction, and find out who is responsible to prevent similar accidents. He then stressed the importance of economic development, promoting further economic liberalization, and urged support from the public and from the legislature on the cross-strait service trade agreement and the free economic pilot zones project.

Inappropriate industrial environment

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It was a highly inappropriate response to an industrial disaster, because Ma failed to re-examine the government's economic development strategy. Instead, he insisted on pushing forward his plans — which have already been questioned by many and were a trigger of the Sunflower movement in March this year.

For a small nation with few resources, international trade is essential and it might also be beneficial for Taipei and its trade partners to mutually lift trade barriers.

However, for Taiwan to do so without being fully prepared, as it is at present, is dangerous.

A copy of the service trade agreement released by the government shows many restrictions for Taiwanese businesses wanting to invest in China, yet almost no restrictions at all for Chinese businesses planning to invest in Taiwan.

So, what would Taiwanese businesses do if Chinese firms dominated the local market, while Taiwanese businesses suffered from trade barriers when investing in China? The government says that Taiwanese companies should be confident, promising that the agreement would be beneficial and that the government would serve as a gatekeeper.

The government did not give concrete answers to the public's doubts decades ago, and it turns out that Taiwanese are suffering the consequences of industrial development.

Today, the public is skeptical about cross-strait trade development and trade liberalization, and the government is again not giving concrete answers to questions.

This is why so many people worry about what might happen a few decades from now.

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