

The error of prioritizing economics over safety

Written by Lee Min-yung 李敏蓉

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As an island on the Western edge of the Pacific Ocean, Taiwan is vulnerable to tropical cyclones that develop into typhoons, while its position on the Pacific “Ring of Fire” makes earthquakes a frequent occurrence. We cannot avoid natural disasters such as these; we can only respond to them.

What about man-made disasters? Industrial development involves hidden dangers. How serious the risks are depends on how well the government manages industrial growth, as well as the social conscience and responsibility of business leaders. Nuclear power and petrochemicals are particularly risky. They are like bombs that could explode at any time.

The government insists that nuclear power is a necessity for power generation and economic development. It wants to go on building nuclear power plants, no matter how much opposition to their construction there may be. Were it not for the disaster at Japan’s Fukushima Dai-ichi power plant after a massive earthquake and tsunami in the region in March 2011, opposition to nuclear power could not make any difference to official policy. The halt to construction of the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant in New Taipei City’s Gongliao District (公寮) is only meant to set people’s minds at ease.

The petrochemical industry is another sector that the government often presents as essential to economic prosperity. Taiwan’s six naphtha crackers are all huge sources of pollution, but industrialists want to build even more. Greater Kaohsiung, in particular, has long been a key industrial base where pipelines carrying toxic and dangerous petrochemical gases run through residential neighborhoods

Two weeks ago, huge explosions tore open a section of Kaohsiung’s Kaisyuan Road and adjoining roads and streets. The blasts are thought to have been caused by propene leaking from pipelines owned by LCY Chemical Corp that were laid stealthily and not properly maintained. As a result, 30 people lost their lives and many more were injured. Adjacent roads and buildings also suffered serious damage, adding up to scenes of death and devastation. This calamity highlights the absurdity of having industrial zones mixed in with residential areas.

This industrial disaster has whipped up a political storm. Dangerous gases should never have been piped past homes and stores, and the pipelines were not subject to standard operation and control procedures. The ensuing political storm involves intrigues and power struggles

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between various parties and factions. Which officials should take the blame? Who will resign and when? There is no rhyme or reason to it.

Many years ago, residents and activists besieged LCY's factory in Hsinchu County for more than a year because of its poor safety record. LCY is a big corporation with an annual turnover of more than NT\$50 billion (US\$1.67 billion), but its attitude following the propene blast has been far from admirable. How can companies get away with such poor management and lack of social responsibility? Over and over again, incidents such as these have exposed a sickness in our nation's mode of development.

We live in an abnormal country, whose government has always trumpeted development and sees everything from the perspective of its seat of power in Taipei.

Beneath the flashy surface lie all kinds of crises and risks. It is a style of politics that prefers power struggles to building reliable systems.

When man-made disasters strike, ordinary people can only tend to their injuries and console one another.

Lee Min-yung is a poet.

Translated by Julian Clegg

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