

The central government under President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) has never had a good reputation for protecting the lives of the public since Typhoon Morakot in August 2009. However, its reputation for ineptness appears to have hit new heights with its negligence in the dengue fever outbreak centered in Tainan.

While much of the blame for the administration's long list of failures can be attributed to basic ineptness, inter-agency and central/local government turf wars and the political patronage games, sometimes it is just pure gutter politics.

The latter appears to be squarely at the heart of the present situation, where Tainan Mayor William Lai (賴清德) is not only from the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), but a physician specializing in spinal cord injuries, who holds a master's degree in public health. It is hard not to see the Ma administration's penchant for personal vendettas playing a role, given Lai's unrelenting criticism of Ma when the mayor was a DPP lawmaker and his months-long feud with Tainan Council Speaker Lee Chuan-chiao (李全教) of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT).

As of yesterday, there have been a total of 11,623 confirmed cases dengue nationwide since the beginning of the summer — 10,157 in Tainan alone and 1,277 in Kaohsiung — with a total of 25 deaths.

However, it was not until Monday night that the Executive Yuan announced that it was establishing a Central Epidemic Command Center to fight the outbreak. Earlier that day, Premier Mao Chi-kuo (馬英九) had said that such a center would be established once the number of cases reached 10,000 nationwide or 1,000 in Kaohsiung. Kaohsiung reached that number just a few hours after Mao spoke.

Yet just one week before, on Sept. 8, Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Director-General Steve Kuo (顧金池) had confidently downplayed the need for such a center, saying that not only would it not be a "good division of labor" between the central and local governments, but that he could see the light at the end of the tunnel and expected the outbreak would begin to run its course by the end of the month. Only if the outbreak "ran out of control" and the Tainan City Government asked for help would a central command center be set up, he said.

Playing politics with people's lives

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So the Ma government has basically been playing a game of chicken with the health and lives of Tainan's residents and others on the line — waiting for Lai to cry “uncle.”

Meanwhile, dengue cases have been reported in all but two of the Tainan's 37 districts — and on Thursday the CDC admitted that the outbreak is more serious than it thought, and it is unlikely to ease until January, by which point the number of cases nationwide could hit 30,000 to 37,000.

The central government set up a Central Epidemic Command Center to fight dengue epidemics twice before, in 2006 and 2010, for far smaller outbreaks. The 2010 center was set up on Oct. 21 and ran until Dec. 31 — yet there were just a total of 1,896 confirmed dengue cases that year, including 304 imported ones, and two deaths. The dengue outbreak in 2006 began to spike in the week of Aug. 7 and did not taper off until the week of Dec. 4; there were a total of 1,074 cases, including 109 imported ones, and four deaths.

Granted, the central government was equally negligent last year, when a total of 15,732 cases of dengue were reported, the highest annual number since it began keeping such records, but that should have been cause for embarrassment and condemnation, not viewed as a precedent for a lack of action.

Unfortunately, those officials and politicians sitting in their gilded offices and homes in Taipei are unlikely to face the consequences of their inaction, either from Control Yuan censure or the bite of an *Aedes aegypti* mosquito. For shame.

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