

Tuesday night's earthquake off the coast of Hualien County has again raised the issue of human fragility in the face of the power of nature and how the geological conditions that exist in Taiwan need to be respected.

As rescue efforts continue to save those trapped in collapsed buildings and to locate the dozens unaccounted for, consideration must go to the inter-related issues of energy supply, public health and construction standards.

Taiwan has three operating nuclear power plants, although they are now only partly operational. The Jinshan and Guosheng plants are in New Taipei City, while the Ma-anshan plant is on the Hengchun Peninsula in the south.

The mothballed Lungmen Nuclear Power Plant in New Taipei City is unlikely to ever be finished.

It was confirmed on Monday that Taiwan Power Co has applied to the Atomic Energy Council to restart the second reactor at the Guosheng plant, which according to government policy is scheduled to be decommissioned in 2023.

Premier William Lai (賴清德) on Tuesday reiterated the government's stance to phase out nuclear power by 2025. His announcement was nevertheless met with protests by environmental groups, who believe it a folly to operate nuclear power plants on an island with frequent and strong seismic activity.

Nuclear power is a relatively clean source of energy, important caveats about the disposal of nuclear waste aside. In a nation that has been plagued for decades by waste and air pollution in its drive to industrialize, and in which there have been mounting concerns in recent months over the issue of air quality, a clean source of energy is very desirable.

Environmental groups are planning an anti-nuclear rally on March 11, the seventh anniversary of the 2011 Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant disaster in Japan, which was a reminder

## Nature needs to be respected

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of the devastation a nuclear accident could cause, irrespective of the quality of the construction and safety measures in place.

Clean air is important for public health, but those benefits could be wiped out overnight should a nuclear disaster happen, especially given the proximity of two of the three operational plants to the capital and within the nation's most-populated area, exacerbated by the concerns over construction quality, enforcement of construction regulations and aging components and structures in the plants in an earthquake zone.

Which brings us to the third concern.

Studies on the collapse of the 17-story Weiguan Jinlong complex in Tainan during the Feb. 6, 2016, earthquake suggest that it was caused by watered-down concrete. It was a cost-saving measure that caused the deaths of 116 people.

Following the devastating 921 Earthquake in 1999, the National Science Council said that serious damage to buildings caused by quakes could be attributed to insufficient earthquake standards in construction and an inadequate quality control process.

Those concerns were voiced again yesterday. A case in point is the Yun Men Tsui Ti complex, built before stricter building code regulations were introduced following the 921 quake.

Hualien prosecutors are considering a probe into whether negligence was involved in the construction of damaged buildings in Hualien City and the National Center for Research on Earthquake Engineering director-general Huang Shih-chien (黃士欽) has called for new laws to encourage the reconstruction of weaker structures.

Yes, buildings should be inspected and concrete samples taken, whether they were built before or after stricter regulations were introduced. Yes, regulations need to be stricter and they need to be enforced. Yes, unscrupulous construction companies need to be prosecuted. And yes, we need to bear in mind we live in an earthquake zone.

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Nature needs to be respected, and so do people's lives.

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