

Safety committee cannot be rushed

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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One positive note emerged this week amid the finger-pointing and rush to judgement in the aftermath of the Puyuma Express train derailment on Sunday that killed 18 passengers and injured 190: Premier William Lai's (賴清德) decision to form an independent "transportation safety committee" to investigate major transportation incidents in the aviation, land and marine sectors.

However, in the rush to ameliorate the public clamor for results, Lai might be pushing the Executive Yuan to move too fast, when consideration is needed as to what shape the committee is to take, its guidelines and its authority.

Lai gave the Ministry of Transportation and Communications just one month to draft an organizational bill for the proposed agency and submit it to the Legislative Yuan for review.

Many nations have such agencies, but they often differ in substantial ways in terms of the sectors they cover, whether they are independent agencies and whether they are tasked with investigating accidents and determining responsibility or blame, or simply to research accidents and advise their governments on policy matters.

The US National Transportation Safety Board has since 1967 been in charge of investigating incidents in the aviation, highway, marine, pipeline and railroad sectors, as well as incidents related to the transportation of hazardous materials. Since 1996, it has also been responsible for coordinating federal assistance to families of accident victims.

The Transportation Safety Board of Canada covers all but highway accidents, while the Swiss Transportation Safety Investigation Board probes civil aviation, cableway, roadway, waterway and railway incidents.

The Japan Transport Safety Board conducts accident investigations, but does not get involved in apportioning blame and liability, while the British Transport Safety Commission says its job is "to inquire into transport safety matters in order to assist with the development of policies that will reduce risk" and lower transport-related casualties.

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In most instances, the governments that have set up such boards or agencies have felt that having a single organization to investigate accidents and promote transportation safety was better than continuing to have separate agencies do the jobs.

Taiwan clearly needs such an independent inquiry agency — not just because of the mishmash of information from the Taiwan Railways Administration in the wake of Sunday's tragedy, but because government task forces specially formed in the wake of such incidents often do not have qualified technical representatives.

As some opposition lawmakers have pointed out, the task force led by Minister Without Portfolio Wu Tze-cheng (吳澤成) that is leading the Cabinet inquiry into the derailment has no members from Nippon Sharyo, the Japanese company that makes the TEMU2000 trains used for the Puyuma Express service.

Compare this with investigations into aviation accidents in Taiwan and elsewhere that almost always include representatives from the manufacturer of the airplane and engines involved.

Taiwan needs an independent agency to investigate all types of transport accidents, but — given the amount of industrial pipelines around the nation — its brief should also cover pipelines and the transport of hazardous materials.

The need for such coverage is clear: Just remember the gas pipeline explosions on July 31, 2014, in Kaohsiung that killed 32 people and injured 321, and conflicting claims of responsibility for maintaining the myriad forest of pipelines from various industries and refineries in the city.

Taiwan needs a transportation safety board, but the government needs to take the time — and be given the time by its critics and the public — to ensure that such an agency is well designed and given the necessary authority.

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