

Still no action on refugee act

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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On World Refugee Day on Thursday last week, lawmakers and civic groups issued a reminder that Taiwan still does not have a refugee act.

First proposed in 2005, a refugee bill in 2016 finally made it past a first reading — but nothing has been done since.

Refugees should be screened carefully, but deporting them back to countries where they could be persecuted does not create a good image, especially when Taiwan bills itself as a beacon of freedom and democracy.

Two Chinese asylum seekers who in September last year arrived in Taiwan after skipping their connecting flight to China were stuck in a restricted area inside Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport for months, because Taiwan simply does not have a mechanism to deal with such situations.

Authorities managed to fly them to a third country for “professional exchanges” in January and then had them re-enter. One of them has since settled in Canada.

It is a complicated situation, as Chinese asylum seekers are not technically treated as foreigners and Taiwan could face political repercussions from Beijing if it decides to openly accept Chinese refugees.

However, since the government ended up helping them anyway, it only shows that what the asylum seekers did, however illegal, ended up working in their favor, and more dissidents will follow their lead. Will they also be marooned in the airport for months before Taiwan deals with the situation in the same manner?

There has already been the case of Li Jiabao (李紀保), a Chinese student in Taiwan who requested asylum after he criticized Chinese President Xi Jinping (習近平) on Twitter in March, and there will surely be more.

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It is important that the nation at least has a policy or a standardized mechanism to deal with asylum seekers from China and other nations.

It will not be an easy process, but doing so will help Taiwan's international image and differentiate it from China, as well as bring more attention to China's tightening social control and human rights abuses.

For international refugees, it is a simpler situation. Taiwan already has an fast-growing foreign population of Southeast Asian migrant workers, students and spouses, who do their part to contribute to the nation.

There will always be outliers who cause harm to society, but that is no reason to shun all refugees.

There is still a stigma that all refugees are poor and uneducated, and will become a burden on society, but the truth is that many are talented professionals who were forced to flee due to external circumstances.

If the Southeast Asian migrants can integrate well into Taiwanese society and prove to be productive, then there should be no problem, as long as there is a clear process to ensure that people are not let in without question.

As Taiwan's birthrate drops and its need for talent and labor increases, it would only benefit the nation's economy and image to at least consider the act, instead of shelving it indefinitely.

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