

Fines do little to end corporate crime

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
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After Carry Hi-tech was last week accused of importing 3.37 million nonmedical-grade masks from China and passing them off as locally produced products to sell as part of the nation's mask rationing system, the Central Epidemic Command Center on Sunday announced that customs officers had uncovered an additional 838,320 imported masks. Such incidents merit legal amendments to more clearly define offenses and set stricter punishments.

Just a few days after the first case, a similar incident, which also purportedly began this past month, was revealed. This coincidence raises the question: How many such cases have not yet been discovered?

Under the Pharmaceutical Affairs Act (藥事法), those who import medical supplies that do not meet the standards set by health authorities face fines of NT\$60,000 to NT\$50 million (US\$2,032 to US\$1.7 million).

However, the act does not set a prison term for offenders, which for some might be hard to swallow, as Carry Hi-tech is suspected of selling bogus Chinese masks passed off as made in Taiwan during a pandemic.

If the allegations are true, this would be Carry Hi-tech's second offense since March, for which it has been fined. This would also cement the popular belief that money-grubbing merchants are not deterred by fines, and that not until their personal freedom is at stake would they finally obey the law.

As legislation often goes hand-in-hand with social issues, when the new legislative session begins later this month, lawmakers across party lines are expected to propose legal amendments to deter unscrupulous businesspeople from importing substandard medical supplies, especially during a pandemic.

There are at least two ways in which lawmakers could address the matter: They could call for prison terms to be stipulated in the act, or they could add them in the Special Act on COVID-19 Prevention, Relief and Recovery (嚴重特殊傳染性肺炎防治及紓解措施特別條例), which only sets a fine for people who hoard medical supplies needed to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Unprincipled businesspeople who import and sell nonmedical-grade, Chinese-made masks not only hurt the government's credibility, they also discredit the hard work of their fellow mask manufacturers enlisted by the rationing system. To the public, they are just more of those who would readily trade Taiwanese's well-being for profit. However they are viewed, their actions have hurt the greater good for their own selfish purposes, and are therefore — to quote President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) — “absolutely unforgivable.”

Of all types of crimes, none have infuriated Taiwanese more than those that harm public health for profit, such as the “gutter oil” and tainted lard scandals in 2014 implicating Ting Hsin Oil and Fat Industrial and Chang Guann.

Former Ting Hsin Oil and Fat chairman Wei Ying-chun (魏英春) was sentenced to four years and eight months in prison over the tainted lard scandal, which many considered too lenient. Such sentences are largely perceived as disproportionate to the crime committed and have led to negative impressions of the justice system.

If the judiciary wants to restore people's faith in it, it must not allow those who have marred the nation's disease prevention efforts with shoddy masks to get away with a slap on the wrist.

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