

Germany has lessons on all-out defense

Written by Kao Chih-yun 高志雲

Wednesday, 11 January 2023 06:28

I fully approve of the structural changes the government has made to Taiwan's military service system to enhance the battle preparedness of draftees.

However, there remains a lack of complementary provisions to cultivate a level of preparedness among the general public, such that any talk of "all-out national defense," including the nation as a whole, remains empty words.

Despite the arrangements for the annual Wan An air drills — the series of military exercises and civil defense drills preparing Taiwanese for emergency situations — the majority of the public are still going about their everyday lives as if there is no immediate danger.

The exercises do not involve members of the public, notably women and citizens too young to have gone through military service, in any substantial way. There is very little classroom instruction, let alone practical application, pertaining to important aspects such as evacuation in times of war, objects and equipment that should be carried or coordination between the armed forces and the general public.

It is no exaggeration to say that Taiwan is ill-prepared, in terms of required equipment and facilities as well as a legal framework, to deal with public threats, be they earthquakes and other natural disasters or an imminent military attack.

Taiwan would do well to learn a thing or two from the approach taken in Germany.

I have been an assistant instructor in chemistry departments in German universities, and the classes in these departments include compulsory attendance of fire drills.

University students and faculty, often more than 100 participants at a time, are expected to enter a smoke-filled room equipped with water or fire extinguishers and put out the source of fires in several locations. In some circumstances, firefighters demonstrate how to put out materials set ablaze for the purpose by patting out the flames with their bare hands.

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Some people attempted to avoid participating in some of the more dangerous-looking activities for one excuse or the other, but my colleagues said that they all had a go. One particularly memorable instance was when a firefighter, wearing protective clothing, set his own back alight and ran around shouting frantically, simulating a scene in which a person was on fire, and the students were required to run after him and extinguish the flames.

The reason for this dramatic display was to teach people how to calmly deal with a similar situation should they be faced with it, providing them with the required experience and confidence to do so.

By comparison, the drills in which I have participated in Taiwan generally involve people watching pre-recorded videos, and even though firefighters are present, they are rarely required to become involved.

When even fire drills are handled in such a superficial manner, one can only imagine what members of the public would do when faced with a major, complex situation such as a military invasion by China.

Experts have said that people on an island lacking sufficient battle preparedness or understanding of what could happen should war break out would easily succumb when the unthinkable happens.

The government should provide detailed measures to deal with emergent situations, be they natural disasters or imminent war, and arrange for the participation of the general public in drills. It should also bolster military-civilian exchanges to ensure that people know what to do when disaster strikes and have the confidence to do it. This is what might be called “all-out national defense.”

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Translated by Paul Cooper

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2023/01/11](#)
