

Morakot victims stage overnight rally

Written by Taipei Times

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Hundreds of victims of Typhoon Morakot from Aboriginal regions in the south yesterday began an overnight sit-in rally in front of the Presidential Office to protest the government's post-disaster reconstruction policies a year after the storm devastated their homes.

"We want to have a say in the reconstruction!" and "No to disunion," the demonstrators shouted as they marched from Liberty Square to Ketagalan Boulevard in front of the Presidential Office.

Leading the parade was a group of schoolchildren from Kaohsiung County's Namasiya Township (南馬西亞) holding a white banner with a slogan in red: "Mr President, where is our Minzu Elementary School?"

Namasiya Township was one of the hardest-hit areas last year. The town's Minzu Elementary School in Nansalu Village (南薩路) was completely wiped out by massive landslides.

Students from the school were evacuated, but a year after the typhoon, they are still attending classes in "temporary" locations.

"A year after the disaster, we're still in deep grief. However, there's something else in our mind, which is anger," Omi Wilang, head of the Alliance for Aboriginal Actions, told the crowd after they arrived at the Ketagalan Boulevard.

"We're angry, because the government is incapable, it is incapable of reconstructing our Aboriginal hometowns," he said.

Saying that devastated Aboriginal communities in the mountain areas are now too dangerous to live in, the government has asked many of the typhoon survivors to abandon their hometowns and move into housing projects in the lowland areas.

POLICIES

"The government says it has never forced us to move. Sure, it hasn't, but all of its post-disaster relief policies are heading in that direction," Omi said. "Aboriginal hometowns are still in rubble, the roads are still damaged, while the government is so eager to build new housing projects in lowland areas — how will Aborigines return to their hometowns if they wish to do so?"

Avai Akuyana, chief of Laiji Village (來吉) in Chiayi County's Alishan Township (阿里山), asked why it's always the Aborigines who have to move.

"Our village is considered unsafe and we're advised to leave, but how come the non-Aboriginal residents living right next to us don't have to move?" Akuyana asked.

Anu Palavi, a resident of Nansalu Village, said that while the new housing projects are

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beautiful, “living in beautiful houses without ways to make a living means nothing.”

To commemorate their neighbors and other families who died during the typhoon, a group of Bunun sang a traditional Bunun mourning song, while pastors from Amis, Tsou and Truku tribes said prayers in their native tongues.

Earlier yesterday, Chern Jenn-chuan (陳建川), deputy minister of the Public Construction Commission and vice chairman of the Executive Yuan’s Post Typhoon Morakot Reconstruction Commission, said the government would listen to the protesters’ voices.

‘WRONGED’

Premier Wu Den-yih (吳登毅) said that he felt “deeply wronged” when typhoon victims accused the government of forcing Aborigines to relocate.

“We’ve never thought of compelling Aborigines living in high mountain areas to move out of their village, nor did we take any action to force them to relocate,” Wu said.

However, the government should have taken greater consideration of how to accommodate Aboriginal religion, culture and customs into the newly built villages, Wu said.

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