

MORAKOT: THE AFTERMATH: Cabinet does about-face in rejection of foreign aid

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The government yesterday did an about-face, saying it would accept foreign aid after the public expressed indignation over the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' (MOFA) decision to refuse all foreign assistance except for cash.

"We welcome all kinds of help from all countries. We will provide a detailed list of the items that we need very soon," Executive Yuan spokesman Su Jun-pin told a press conference following the weekly Cabinet meeting yesterday. "The list could include personnel, aircraft and heavy machinery."

On Tuesday, MOFA said it was only accepting cash donations and declined all other forms of assistance, such as goods and search and rescue teams.

MOFA spokesman Henry Chen told reporters at the time that Taiwan was grateful for the kind offers of help extended by the international community, but said that Taiwan was capable of handling the disaster on its own.

Chen's comments drew fire from the public, which panned the government as being money hungry and apathetic toward the plight of flood victims.

Angry citizens bombarded the ministry with complaints yesterday, urging it to immediately open the borders to foreign aid.

Some bloggers compared the Taiwanese government with the military junta in Myanmar when it blocked foreign humanitarian groups from helping after Cyclone Nargis devastated the country last May, leaving thousands to fend for themselves.

The government's position on accepting foreign aid remained unclear through Wednesday, with Presidential Office Spokesman Wang Yu-chi quoted by media as saying that the Presidential Office respected MOFA's decision and its professional judgment, while Premier Liu Chao-shiuan, at a separate setting later on Wednesday, said Taiwan was willing to accept help from other countries and would make requests when necessary.

Su yesterday said the remarks were a misunderstanding.

"The main concern of the Executive Yuan was that any aid should be able to meet the needs of the disaster areas," Su said. "The Executive Yuan first asked each government department to determine which items were in sufficient supply. As for other equipment and whether we need foreign help in frontline rescue operations, related government departments will decide whether it is proper based on their expertise. The government is working on collecting information and doing further studies."

Soon after the government said it was willing to accept aid from other countries, US\$1.1

