

Dalai Lama tours areas hit hard by Typhoon Morakot

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People wearing T-shirts with a picture of the Dalai Lama on the back wait for the arrival of the 14th Dalai Lama.
PHOTO: CHU PEI-HSIUNG, TAIPEI TIMES

The Dalai Lama visited Siaolin Village (沙林村) in Jiasian Township (嘉山鄉), Kaohsiung County, yesterday on the first full day of his five-day trip, where he hugged survivors of Typhoon Morakot and prayed for its victims.

“Mom, Dad, the Dalai Lama has come to pray for you, please come up quickly,” Chen Lan-yin (陳蘭音), a Siaolin survivor, said while the Dalai Lama held a ritual to bring peace to the departed at the site where the village once stood.

More than 400 people were buried alive when massive landslides triggered by torrential rain brought by Morakot flattened the village on Aug. 9.

“As a Buddhist, what I can do is pray for them [the storm victims], wishing them that in their next life, they can still be human and live a happier life,” the Dalai Lama said after finishing the ritual.

He told survivors not to lose confidence and to continue living.

One Siaolin villager — who lost six family members in the disaster — kneeled in front of the Dalai Lama with his two friends and asked for a blessing. The Tibetan spiritual leader hugged them.

“Although we don’t understand what the Dalai Lama was saying, we do feel better now in our mind,” another villager said.

Before leaving Siaolin, the Dalai Lama took questions from reporters.

Asked about Beijing’s reaction to the visit, he said that the purpose of his trip was purely religious and that it should not be a problem.

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Asked if he would meet President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), the Dalai Lama said that no political agenda was planned on his side, including meeting Ma, as he didn't want to "create inconveniences [for] anybody."

Asked to comment on protests against his visit, the Dalai Lama said it was a good thing.

"I am dedicated to promotion of democracy — that's their freedom of expression," he said. "I love it."

After visiting Siaolin, the Dalai Lama went to Jiadong Township (佳冬) in Pingtung County — which was flooded by Morakot — to visit victims at a local temple.

More than half a month after the floodwater receded, streets in Jiadong are still filled with putrid mud.

Although the Dalai Lama said that his visit is purely religious and non-political, Taiwanese Friends of Tibet chairwoman Chow Mei-li (周美莉) said in a press conference yesterday that the government was bowing to pressure from Beijing, adding that, in her opinion, this was the real reason behind last-minute changes to the Dalai Lama's itinerary.

The Dalai Lama had been scheduled to hold a press conference yesterday morning, to deliver a public speech at the Kaohsiung Arena this afternoon and another public speech at the Taoyuan County Stadium tomorrow.

The press conference and the Taoyuan speech have been canceled, while the venue for the lecture in Kaohsiung was moved from the Kaohsiung Arena — which holds up to 15,000 people — to a smaller venue at his hotel that has a capacity of 700 people.

Chairman of the Tibet Religious Foundation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama — the representative office of the exiled government — Dawa Tsering said the press conference was canceled because Kaohsiung Mayor Chen Chu (陳水扁) strongly suggested that the Dalai Lama spend more time visiting disaster areas.

The cancelation of the public event in Taoyuan, he said, was the result of problems in booking the venue. Dawa said the speech in Kaohsiung was moved to a smaller venue to cut down on the number of police officers needed to ensure security.

Chow, however, maintained that the changes were the consequence of pressure from China.

"The first step was to cancel the press conference, so that Taiwanese cannot hear the true voice of the Dalai Lama," Chow said. "Then it was the public event in Taoyuan — also for the same purpose."

"China is afraid that once Taiwanese hear what the Dalai Lama has to say it would undermine its propaganda campaign," Chow said. "And since Taiwan and China are all

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Chinese-speaking countries and information in Taiwan can easily reach the Chinese public, Beijing is afraid that the people will realize that Chinese officials are lying about the Dalai Lama.”

Chow also criticized Ma for acting like Beijing’s protege and always following whatever China says.

“The changes were made after an envoy from the governing Chinese Nationalist Party [KMT] made a visit to Beijing,” she said. “It’s such a shame for Taiwan.”

KMT Chairman Wu Poh-hsiung (吳伯雄) confirmed on Saturday that a KMT representative had been sent to China to discuss the Dalai Lama’s visit, but maintained that the trip was to facilitate cross-strait communications.

In related news, in response to a controversy over whether Taiwan or the exiled government took the initiative in organizing the visit, the Kaohsiung City Government said in a press conference that “while the Dalai Lama has expressed his interest in visiting Taiwan several times in the past few years,” it was Kaohsiung Mayor Chen Chu who took the initiative to coordinate with local government heads to jointly send an invitation.

DPP spokesman Cheng Wen-tsang (鄭文堂) criticized the government for restricting the Dalai Lama’s scope to address the public.

“In almost every country he goes, the Dalai Lama is recognized as a highly respected world leader. The [Ma] government is turning Taiwan into an international laughing stock by trying to minimize his significance and importance,” he said.

The DPP also said the invitation was extended by the seven local government chiefs in southern Taiwan and not initiated by the party, as some media have reported.

DPP Legislator Wang Sing-nan (王sing-nan) said Ma should meet the spiritual leader to “gain wisdom on how to lead a country,” while DPP lawmaker Chiu Yi-ying (邱毅) urged Beijing and the pan-blue camp not to politicize the visit and to treat it as a humanitarian endeavor.

Meanwhile, the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) said the administration would redouble its efforts to communicate with Beijing after China’s Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) said the Dalai Lama’s visit was bound to have a negative impact on cross-strait relations.

MAC Deputy Minister Liu Te-shun (劉德勝) said the visit of the Nobel Peace laureate was religious in nature and that the administration did not have any political reasons to allow him to hold prayers for the victims of Morakot.

Liu was evasive on whether the visit would have any negative impact on the forthcoming high-level cross-strait talks or an economic cooperation framework agreement (ECFA) the administration intends to sign with Beijing.

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Liu said the administration never changed its aggressive attitude to improving cross-strait relations.

“The government will do its best to protect and increase mutual trust and the achievements that have been made over the past year,” he said. “We hope [the visit] will not affect the stable development of cross-strait ties.”

KMT Legislator John Chiang (蔣經國) expressed concerns that the Dalai Lama’s visit might affect the government’s plan to sign an ECFA.

Li Yafei (李雅非), assistant minister of the TAO, said yesterday that Beijing’s position on the Dalai Lama’s visit to Taiwan was resolute and that the trip was bound to have an adverse effect on cross-strait ties.

Li did not elaborate, adding that Beijing would continue to monitor developments in the visit.

A delegation from the People’s Bank of China postponed its trip to Taiwan for a week, while a financial symposium on cross-strait economics with the Chinese Monetary Society scheduled for today in Taipei was rescheduled to next Monday.

Describing the Dalai Lama’s visit as a “political calculation” of the DPP, KMT Secretary-General Wu Den-yih (吳登益) urged the Dalai Lama to refrain from falling into a “political whirlpool.”

Wu said he was in favor of the visit, but that many indicators showed that the hard-earned peaceful and stable relationship between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait had changed.

He called on the DPP to refrain from “provoking” Beijing as China had made several “goodwill” gestures since the KMT came to power.

Wu said a majority of Taiwanese believed the direction of the government’s cross-strait policy was correct, adding that “some people” wanted to “create conflict.”

Meanwhile, former president Lee Teng-hui’s (李登輝) office yesterday was evasive about the possibility of a meeting between Lee and the Dalai Lama.

Legislative Speaker Wang Jin-pyng (王金平) downplayed the political impact of the visit, adding that Taiwanese should help the spiritual leader complete his humanitarian visit.

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