

Taiwan shuns Milan expo after sovereignty squabble

Written by Taipei Times

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Taiwan has decided not to participate in Expo 2015 in Milan after reviewing an Italian government proposal that it present itself as a “corporate entity” at the world fair rather than a nation, officials said yesterday.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been in talks with Rome in the hopes of working out an arrangement, “but it is a pity that Italy only agreed to [our] presence as ‘Taiwan Corporate’ in the ‘corporate area,’” ministry spokesperson Anna Kao (高英) said.

According to a government source, Taiwan failed to secure a commitment from the Italian government that the nation would have a pavilion in the expo’s country area. Rome had proposed that Taiwan be placed in the corporate area.

The Ministry of Economic Affairs has assessed Rome’s proposal by soliciting opinions from Taiwanese firms about how their participation would generate new business opportunities and concluded that the expected economic benefits would be “limited,” an official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because she was not authorized to speak on the matter.

They “were not enthusiastic” about the world fair, she said.

A report from Milan by television station TVBS on Monday quoted Lai Tien-fu (賴天福), chairman of the Taiwanese business association in the city, as saying that an area of about 330 ping (1,090m²) had been designated a “Taiwan corporate” pavilion near the pavilions of Russia, Saudi Arabia and Japan.

The cost of a corporate pavilion was about NT\$300 million (US\$9.69 million), a third of the NT\$1 billion it cost Taiwan to participate in Expo 2010 in Shanghai, Lai said.

It was a shame that the government decided to shun the expo out of “national dignity and fiscal situation” concerns, Lai said.

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Lai said that he filed petitions with Taiwan's representative office in Italy and President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), only to be given the cold shoulder.

Meanwhile, a report on the expo's Web site said that the Italy-Taiwan inter-parliamentary friendship group raised a parliamentary question with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to find out why Taiwan's participation in the expo had not yet been ensured.

The report said the parliamentary question bore the signature of Italian Senator Lucio Malan, president of the friendship group.

In his question, Malan said the Italian government was risking excluding a democratic country from the expo out of "fear of the giant, Beijing."

The report said that Malan wanted to bring the diplomatic detente between Taipei and Beijing to Italian Foreign Minister Emma Bonino's attention.

Valter Zanetta, president of the association for cultural and economic relationships between Italy and Taiwan, was quoted in the report as saying that the offer made by Rome to use the title "Taiwan corporate" was not accepted because that would imply Taiwan is a company and not a country.

According to the expo's Web site, participants in the expo are identified as official or non-official as defined by the rules of the International Exhibitions Bureau, an intergovernmental organization created to supervise the expo.

Official participants are 144 countries and three international organizations, while non-official participants may be groups of representatives, institutions or other entities.

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Given the importance of the expo's theme, the Italian government decided in 2011 to invite all UN member states to open the doors of the expo to non-governmental organizations and companies as key stakeholders in the global debate on the challenges related to nutrition and food, it said.

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