

Curriculum Protests: Groups demand release of students

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Protesters allegedly trying to break into the Ministry of Education building clash with police in Taipei early yesterday morning.

Photo: CNA

High-school student protesters and civic groups yesterday rallied outside the Ministry of Education building in Taipei, demanding the release of students arrested in the early hours of the morning after breaking into the complex.

“We demand that our comrades be immediately released and not be subjected to violent judicial hunting,” Taoyuan High School Alliance spokesperson Liao Hao-hsiang (廖豪翔) said.

“If the ministry does not give us a reasonable and positive response today, we will continue our protest, refusing to bend in spite of last night’s [Friday morning’s] violent expulsion,” he said.

He repeated demands that proposed adjustments to high-school curriculum guidelines be removed and that new regulations covering adjustments be introduced to prevent a repetition of the controversy.

The curriculum guidelines have sparked protests over what critics call a “China-centric” focus and an opaque “black box” approval process.

Hsinchu and Miaoli Anti-Curriculum Guidelines Working Group convener Mu Yu-feng (吳玉峰) said the ministry’s stance had “compelled” students to take more extreme measures.

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“We have already tried numerous peaceful protests and the government has lost a lawsuit, but it has remained totally unmoved,” Mu said.

The ministry is appealing a ruling by the Taipei High Administrative Court ordering it to release a complete list of the curriculum review committee members, along with meeting minutes and voting results.

Northern Taiwan Anti-Curriculum Changes Alliance spokesperson Wang Pin-chen (王品陳) said the ministry had refused to allow public meetings between activists and Minister of Education Wu Se-hwa (吳思華) or his deputies.

“On this matter, we have been like a mute person eating canker root — there is no choice but to suffer in silence,” Wang said.

At a forum on Thursday night, K-12 Education Administration Director Wu Ching-shan (吳景山) did not take the students seriously, instead repeating ministry talking points like a “skipping needle,” she said.

She said students decided at an impromptu meeting to break into the ministry compound after they stormed out of the forum, denying that there was any involvement by external political forces.

More than 20 students scaled barricades late on Thursday night, forcing open two side doors and locking themselves in the minister’s second-floor office.

Other than a side door found off its hinges, it was unclear whether there had been any damage, with students claiming that they had not damaged anything in the offices.

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While the ministry said in a press release that students had damaged a reception desk and broken down the minister's office door, officials blocked reporters from accessing the ministry's second floor yesterday morning, claiming that damage to the site had already been restored to allow the ministry to conduct normal operations.

A video recorded by a student and posted online showed an impromptu barricade of chairs and potted plants against an office door, but there were no visible signs of damage.

Before the person behind the camera was subdued, police were shown dragging protesters across the office floor, with a line of others yelling slogans as they sat at the back of the room.

The ministry said 33 people had been arrested: 24 students, three reporters and six non-student protesters.

Eleven minors were among those arrested, it said.

Following news of the students' arrests, more than 100 people gathered outside the ministry complex early yesterday morning to demand their release. They were later dispersed by police.

Wang said that all but one of the students were handcuffed and refused access to their mobile phones, making it impossible for their parents to contact them.

Taiwan Association for Human Rights legal specialist Hsu Jen-shuo (許建綽) said the handcuffing of students was "disproportionate" and a breach of the Police Power Exercise Act (警察權行使法), which allows handcuffing only if someone attempts to escape or resists arrest.

Because the students were only sitting in protest before they were arrested, the police had no right to handcuff them and indirectly deprive them of their ability to contact a lawyer or their parents, Hsu said.

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