

Thousands rally over mining extension

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Protesters form the outline of Taiwan during a march in Taipei yesterday against the extension of Asia Cement's mining rights in Hualien County.

Photo courtesy of Citizens of the Earth, Taiwan

Thousands of protesters yesterday marched from the Executive Yuan to the Presidential Office Building in Taipei to back demands that the government terminate a controversial extension of Asia Cement Corp's (台泥) mining rights in Hualien County's Sincheng Township (新成鄉).

Members of protest organizer Citizen of the Earth, Taiwan (CET) and others gathered in front of the Control Yuan shouting: "Abolish Asia Cement's mining rights! Reform the mining sector!"

Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Legislator Lin Shu-fen (林淑芬) said Asia Cement did not obtain the consent of Aboriginal landowners before applying for the extension of its mining rights, which it should have done to conform to Article 21 of the Indigenous Peoples Basic Act (原住民族基本法).

The Ministry of Economic Affairs said on Monday last week that its approval of the extension was not illegal, with Executive Yuan spokesperson Hsu Kuo-yung (許國鈞) saying the administration supports the ministry's decision.

"Is the Indigenous Peoples Basic Act not a legal regulation?" Lin said. "Should the Executive Yuan not do its job according to the law?"

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The CET led protesters to the Executive Yuan, which was guarded by dozens of police officers with shields in front of the main gate of the compound.

“If Aborigines can be deprived of their land, are the properties of other people not also likely to be expropriated by the authorities at some point?” CET researcher Pan Cheng-cheng (潘成程) said.

Performing on a stage mounted on a truck that drove alongside the marchers, musician Huang Wei-jie (黃偉杰) told the crowd: “Do not forget what kind of power and responsibility we have in our hands.”

At one point during the march the protesters formed the outline of Taiwan proper.

By 6pm there were about 7,000 protesters on Ketagalan Boulevard facing the Presidential Office Building, the Wild at Heart Legal Defense Association posted on Facebook.

From her wheelchair, Tien Chun-chou (田俊周), a 74-year-old Truku Aborigine, said that she has fought for 20 years to reclaim her family’s land from Asia Cement.

Political commentator Yao Li-ming (姚立明) said he had followed the mining extension issue since March.

“You can see that most protesters are, unlike me, young people,” he said. “They can see very clearly how the bureaucracy has been covering up for corporations.”

Another protester surnamed Juan (簡), who works as a consultant for land developers, said he was surprised to learn that the company’s extension had been granted in just three months.

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“We always face a lot of difficulties when applying for land development permits,” he said.

DPP Legislator Chen Man-li (陳曼列), who joined the march, said the government should request that all mining firms stop their mining activity until problems with the Mining Act are resolved.

However, the current extraordinary session of the legislature is unlikely to review proposed amendments to the act, as it has many other bills to review, Chen said.

Asia Cement’s mining activities in Sincheng came under renewed criticism after aerial footage from documentary filmmaker Chi Po-lin (齊柏林) — who was killed on June 10 in a helicopter crash while filming — appeared to show that it has expanded its mining operations.

President Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) on Saturday presented a posthumous commendation for Chi Po-lin to his father, Chi Wei-hsin (齊維新), at a retrospective of the filmmaker and photographer’s work at Songshan Cultural and Creative Park in Taipei.

Losing Chi was like losing “a pair of divine eyes,” she said, adding that the government would reform the mining sector.

Asia Cement Corp yesterday expressed its respect for the opinions of every individual and group.

In a four-point statement on its Web site, it said its current mining operation in Hualien County is not within the boundaries of Taroko National Park, adding that it has been abiding by the law and welcomes examination by all sides.

It will follow the government’s policies in promoting the economy and would make contributions toward sustainable development in Taiwan, it said.

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