

Communities have right to know

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The tragic deaths and injuries caused by the gas explosions in Greater Kaohsiung's Cianjhen (前鎮) and Lingya (苓雅) districts resulted from serious problems with the way the government and corporations handled the environment, disaster prevention and disaster response. Companies such as LCY Chemical Corp and China General Terminal & Distribution Corp continued to use old, unmaintained pipelines, with scant regard for public safety, to pump petrochemicals, and attempted to shirk all responsibility after the explosions.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Economic Affairs, responsible for the petrochemical pipelines, was at a complete loss, not having any data on the industrial pipes used for propene. Clearly, the ministry had not established a databank for pipeline management as it was required to do by the Petroleum Administration Act (石油管理法), passed in 2001.

Neither did the local government in Greater Kaohsiung — in which the petroleum industry has such a conspicuous presence — nor the fire department for that matter, know anything about where the pipes lay underground. Add all this to the fact that the authorities did not provide the fire department with the adequate scientific equipment or facilities and together all these factors led to this tragedy.

Those who perished in the explosions must not be allowed to have died in vain. Neither should the city's several million residents be kept in ignorance and expected to continue living in fear of another petrochemical explosion.

Not only should the government conduct an inquiry into pipelines throughout the country, carry out safety inspections and require that old pipelines be replaced, it should also do so transparently and make the information publicly available.

The ministry's Bureau of Energy, having announced there is a total of 4,060km in gas pipelines across the country, refused to publish an actual layout of these pipelines, concerned that such a move might cause unnecessary public worry. This is just the kind of outdated mentality that has led governments at all levels to refuse to recognize the community's right to know.

Major industrial disasters often inspire much-needed reforms. The 1984 Bhopal disaster, a gas leak from a Union Carbide chemical fertilizer plant in India, caused an estimated 8,000 deaths in a matter of days, with as many as 25,000 people affected at the time. Even today, about 50,000 people are still suffering from chronic illnesses as a result of exposure to toxins from that leak.

This unprecedented disaster led to an increased awareness of the importance of industrial safety in highly polluting industries and risk management the world over.

In 1986, the US passed its Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act. The act was a set of provisions related to chemical disaster response, requiring public access to information about chemicals, to avoid similar disasters on US soil.

As part of these provisions, federal, state and local governments, tribes and corporations using chemicals over a certain stipulated volume are required to have a chemical disaster emergency plan and to update it yearly. The emergency plan committee is to be made up of representatives from the fire department, medical fields, government, media, community groups, business and emergency management.

Companies must provide reports on which chemicals they store and use, and what toxins these emit, with a list of more than 600 toxic chemicals that must be reported. Should a company accidentally release toxins above a certain stipulated volume, it must immediately report this to officials and inform the public. The public has the right to know, and state and federal governments need to have material safety data sheets available, as do local fire departments.

The reason the Kaohsiung disaster was so terribly tragic was that neither the fire department nor the city's residents had any idea where the pipelines were located, and had no idea of how much risk they were in.

The Cabinet and the legislature have to address this situation, to improve the nation's industrial safety and risk management and give communities the right to know.

For the past half-century, the government and industry have been in each other's pockets. Heavy industries such as petrochemicals have become excessively concentrated in Greater Kaohsiung, and this has meant that Kaohsiung residents have been excessively exposed to pollution and risk. The people of Kaohsiung can no longer put their lives at risk as part of this game of unconstrained development.

It is high time that the aging equipment and plants used in the Greater Kaohsiung petrochemical industry are replaced or decommissioned: The government has given its assurance that the CPC Corp, Taiwan and LCY Chemical plants in Kaohsiung's Dashe Petrochemical Industrial Park are to be closed next year and in 2018 respectively.

The whole petrochemical industry should also cut its production capacity, to reduce pollution, and should also work with the government on ways to improve its handling of the environment, industrial safety and risk management, including moving pipelines far away from urban centers.

Taiwan should work toward prioritizing the environment and industrial transformation. Then Greater Kaohsiung residents will get their right to know and environmental justice.

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