



▲ The National Fire Agency organizes a search and rescue drill at its training center in Nantou County.

Disaster Preparedness

“TAIWAN CAN HELP,” says Huan-Chang Hsiao (蕭煥章), deputy director-general of the National Fire Agency (NFA), quoting a government slogan that offers Taiwan’s broad-ranging expertise and experience to the world. These are not empty words just to garner international support: Countries especially in the Pacific region have been eager to learn from Taiwan’s advancements in disaster relief and emergency management at the National Fire Agency’s training center in Nantou County’s Zhushan Township.

“More natural and manmade disasters are happening in the world due to global warming and climate change,” Hsiao says. “Every country has to consider how they would deal with them.”

Covering 109 hectares, the training center is the third-largest in the world and the biggest in Asia, lagging only behind the 250-hectare Fire Service College at Moreton-in-Marsh in Gloucestershire, England, and a 150-hectare facility at Texas A&M University in the US. The main complex was expanded in 2017 with the specific goal of increasing international exchanges with New Southbound partner countries.

Encompassing two detention basins and irrigation canals, the grounds contain a 30 hectare conservation area with “green” buildings that have all passed environmental assessments, fitting the government’s push toward a sustainable, circular economy. It includes a comprehensive list of simulation grounds for a wide range of scenarios, from ship fires and collapsed buildings to aviation accidents.

The training center showcases Taiwan’s state-of-the-art equipment, and has drawn enthusiastic interest from visitors. The New Southbound Policy is geared to generate more business opportunities for Taiwanese companies in its partner countries — and Hsiao says the best way of doing that is to let visitors to the center use the equipment themselves during training exercises.

Hsiao adds that in addition to hands-on training, the center produces teaching materials in accordance with international standards that focus on strategic planning and management.

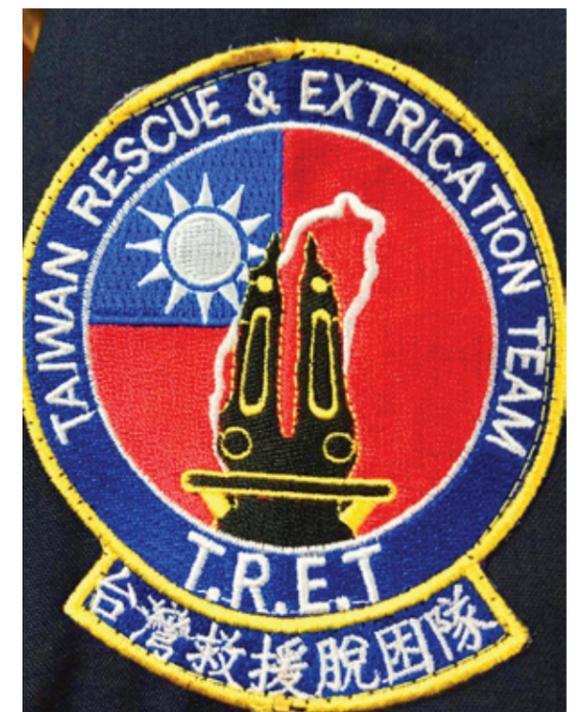
“We’re basing everything on the simple principle that each life is priceless,” Hsiao says.

As South and Southeast Asia are prone to various disasters, including earthquakes and flooding, the National Fire Agency has been providing increased training in disaster prevention and relief through the New Southbound Policy, with the goal of reinforcing the region’s mutual aid network. Hsiao stresses that disaster relief has always been an international effort, and it only makes sense that Taiwan ramps up its international cooperation in the region.

“There are no boundaries for firefighting or emergency management,” Hsiao says.

From typhoons and earthquakes to dust explosions and transportation accidents, Taiwan has seen its share of disasters in recent decades, most notably the devastating 921 Earthquake of 1999. The National Fire Agency training center was created in response to the earthquake in order to enhance Taiwan’s capabilities in dealing with disasters, and to share its experience with other countries so that they can avoid making the same mistakes.

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▲ A Taiwan Rescue and Extrication Team badge.

The center has enjoyed close ties with the Philippines since its inauguration in 2010, and Filipino-Chinese volunteer fire brigade members have been visiting for training ever since. Thirty-two firefighters from 15 cities made the trip in April 2019 to participate in a week-long training program that includes vehicle extrication, fire equipment, fire control and first aid. The firefighters told the press that they acquired skills and experience using equipment not available in the Philippines, including the use of a self-contained breathing apparatus.



▲ Vietnamese firefighters, bottom right, undergo firefighting training at the National Fire Agency's training center in Nantou County's Zhushan Township.

In July 2018, the government announced that the training would be extended to professional Philippine firefighters based on the New Southbound Policy. Exchanges between the two nations have increased, with delegates from the Philippines' National Fire Training Institute as well as government officials visiting the facility in 2018 and 2019. The Philippine government in turn invited the National Fire Agency to share its experience with its counterparts in Manila.

Taichung has been one of Taiwan's most active municipalities in reaching out to New Southbound Policy partner countries. Most recently in May 2019, the Taichung City Government hosted a delegation from the Department of the Interior and Local Government of the Philippines, who came specifically to learn about the city's disaster prevention mechanisms and discuss avenues for mutual cooperation.

In March 2017, the Taichung City Government hosted a joint training event with firefighters from Vietnam's Binh Duong Province. Just north of Ho Chi Minh City, the province ranks third in Vietnam in foreign direct investment, with Taiwan being the

top investor at 841 projects worth US\$5.5 billion as of August 2019. The exercise not only enhances the experience of the participants on both sides, but also demonstrates Taiwan's ability to educate Southeast Asian professionals.

New Zealand sent a search and rescue team to Taiwan after the 921 Earthquake in 1999, while Taiwan reciprocated after the 2011 Christchurch Earthquake. For the 20th anniversary of the 921 Earthquake, Taichung invited firefighters from its sister city of Auckland who had helped with disaster relief efforts in 1999 to attend a tour and presentation.

Taiwan's capabilities in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief have also caught the attention of the US, which is working with the National Fire Agency through the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) to establish Taiwan as a regional training center in the Asia-Pacific. This is not unlike the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) International Environmental Partnership with the US, which was formed in 2014 and most recently held an Asia-Pacific Mercury Monitoring Network Workshop in Jakarta in August 2019.

Through the Global Cooperation and Training Framework (GCTF) initiative launched in 2015, the US and Taiwan co-hosted the GCTF's first international workshop at the NFA's training center in July 2017. Six guest countries participated, including the New Southbound Policy partner nations of Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand.

The most recent workshop took place in December 2018 with 10 Pacific countries participating. In his opening remarks, AIT Deputy Director Raymond Greene called Taiwan a "model of disaster preparedness in the region" and lauded its willingness to assist other countries in the past decade, including after Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 wrought widespread destruction in the Philippines, and the 2015 Nepal Earthquake.

"Generating a robust domestic and international response to natural disasters is essential to ensuring that each of our communities, and the region as a whole, can rebound quickly," Greene says.

Another of Taiwan's strengths lies in the prevention and management of hazardous materials incidents, Hsiao says. The nation has continued to update and improve its Toxic Chemical Substances Control Act, renaming it the Toxic Chemical Substances Monitoring and Control Act in December 2018 to expand the legislation's remit to non-toxic substances that may pose environmental or health hazards.

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▲ Army personnel undergo aircraft disaster and hijacking training at the National Fire Agency's training center in Nantou County's Zhushan Township on Sept. 1, 2019.