

SUNDAY FEATURES

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Tu Yao-shun, 53, who lost his home and guesthouse business to Typhoon Morakot and now lives in housing provided by the Tzu Chi Foundation, harvests organic jelly figs to make a living.

PHOTO: DAVID CHEN, TAIPEI TIMES

Shelter from the storm

Typhoon Morakot struck one year ago today, wiping out several villages, killing more than 700 and displacing thousands. While storm survivors are relieved to be moving into new homes provided by the government and aid groups, some critics say the reconstruction effort has failed to address basic needs

BY DAVID CHEN
STAFF REPORTER

Tu Yao-shun (杜耀順), 53, is full of mixed emotions. He doesn't want to appear ungrateful to the Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation (慈濟基金會), the charity that has provided him and his family with a new home after they lost theirs to Typhoon Morakot.

The storm struck one year ago today, causing catastrophic floods and landslides across southern Taiwan that killed more than 700 people.

Tu and everyone in his family escaped unhurt. But their loss remains bitter.

"It's not such a happy feeling," says Tu, sitting in the living room of his new 32 ping (105m²) house in Kaohsiung County, which he now shares with an extended family of 15 persons — his wife, a son, six daughters, three sons-in-law and four grandchildren, with another on the way.

The Tus, who are Bunun Aborigines (布農族), are accustomed to having more space. Before Morakot, they ran a 200 ping (661m²) guesthouse and tourist farm located on a scenic 10-hectare riverside property in Fuxing Village (復興村), Taoyuan Township (桃園鄉), in the mountains of Kaohsiung County.

Tu's 27-year-old daughter, Tu Hsiao-huan (杜曉環), pulled out a stack of photographs showing what they had lost: land that had been in the family for four generations on which sat a charming guesthouse with intricate rock patterns surrounding the doors and windows, and a garden shaded by tall, leafy trees. The Tus had spent 15 years planning their business, which along with a cold drinks stand saw them earning more than NT\$100,000 a month after they opened in 2004, and had built the house themselves.

Now it's all gone. All of their possessions, save for the clothes on their backs, were washed away by Morakot's rains, which flooded their house and much of their farmland, turning all of it into a rocky riverbed. The photographs were given to the Tus by friends and past guests.

Tu Yao-shun says it wasn't an easy decision to move to Tzu Chi's housing project in Shanlin Township (杉林鄉), dubbed the "Kaohsiung Shanlin Tzu Chi Great Love Village" (高雄杉林慈濟大愛園區), where his family is allowed to stay permanently. Until they moved there in June, they had been living in Kaohsiung City, working at a night market, but found it difficult to keep up with the rent.

"We want to rely on ourselves," he said. "But we had to be practical, we had to take refuge here."

The Tus are among the 10,000 people moving into permanent housing built by NGOs and charity groups on land provided by the central government. Free housing is being offered to Typhoon Morakot victims

who lost their homes, as well as residents living in mountain areas that the government considers to be at risk of landslides or other natural disasters.

Two of the biggest projects are now underway. World Vision Taiwan is building around 500 homes at Majia Farms (瑪家農場) in Pingtung County, which will house about 2,500 people and are slated for completion this November.

The Shanlin Great Love Village, where the Tus live, is the largest housing area for the storm victims. Most of its 750 residences have already been filled and it will house around 3,200 people in total, with room for expansion in the future.

GREAT LOVE VILLAGE

To the thousands of storm survivors moving in from mountain areas, Shanlin Great Love Village is a significant change of environment.

The community, which spans 59 hectares, is located on flatland and looks like a modern suburban development.

The houses all sport the same ash-gray exterior, which seems to suit Tzu Chi's Buddhist aesthetic, and are arranged in long, orderly rows. The streets are spacious and free of traffic — it looks safe for kids. Within the grounds, there are two churches and an auditorium.

Even though most of the houses are occupied, the neighborhood felt empty, almost like a ghost town, when I visited on a hot afternoon last month.

Trees had been freshly planted, and children's bicycles were scattered about. Several families had already done up their gardens.

Chiu Shih-yi (邱師義), a 53-year-old Bunun musician, decided to move there in February after government inspectors declared his mountain home in Taoyuan Township (桃園鄉) a high-risk area prone to landslides.

He said it took a month to adjust to Shanlin Great Love Village, with its lack of tall trees and a different view of the mountains. But he says the living conditions are worth it.

"To tell the truth, our homes on the mountain were not this nice," he said.

Tzu Chi spent between NT\$2 million and NT\$3 million on each of the houses, which are made of lightweight steel structures and designed to withstand high winds and earthquakes.

"We adopted the same approach that they use for skyscrapers to build these houses," said Tzu Chi representative Chung Yi-jui (鍾易叡).

But for all of the attention to detail and despite its reputation as a highly organized and efficient aid organization, Tzu Chi has recently been the subject of criticism from Aboriginal groups and scholars.

One group of Aboriginal rights activists in Taipei accused Tzu Chi of engaging in



Top left: The government and aid groups are providing permanent and temporary housing for victims of Typhoon Morakot, like this project in Taitung County sponsored by World Vision Taiwan and built by architect Hsieh Ying-chun.

Above: Taitung County, nearly one year after Typhoon Morakot struck.

Right: Temporary housing for Morakot victims in Jinfong Township, Taitung County.

PHOTOS: DAVID CHEN, TAIPEI TIMES



inappropriate self-promotion by hosting visitors' tours at the Shanlin Great Love Village, according to reports in Chinese-language media earlier this week. Tzu Chi responded by saying the residents welcomed visitors.

The most nagging criticism comes from a group representing Kaohsiung County's Siaoilin Village (小林村), which suffered the worst damage from Typhoon Morakot — 500 residents died after massive mudslides triggered by the storm's heavy rains buried most of the village.

Tzu Chi is accused of ignoring the villagers' wishes.

The 300 or so surviving villagers have relocated to two places. Some moved to Wulipu Village (五里埔村), near their old home, where permanent housing is being built by the Red Cross Society of the Republic of China.

Others are moving to Shanlin Township, where they were offered homes in Tzu Chi's Shanlin Great Love Village. Around 30 families accepted the offer, and about 100 villagers want to live in Shanlin Township, but not at the Great Love Village.

"From the beginning, we never wanted to live in the kind of places that Tzu Chi was building," said 37-year-old Hsu Pao-yin (徐寶寅) of the Siaoilin Village Reconstruction Group (小林村重建會).

The problem with Tzu Chi, Hsu said, is

that it did not offer incoming residents a say in the design of their new housing and community.

"There was no room for discussion. None at all. They completely did not consider the [Morakot] victims' own ideas and their local culture," Hsu said.

Siaoilin residents moving to Wulipu, on the other hand, were satisfied with their consultations with the Red Cross, he said.

Hsu says that Siaoilin villagers' biggest wish is to recreate a community that resembles their old home. For example, the villagers want to use concrete instead of the "high-tech" building materials used by Tzu Chi. "[Using concrete] gives us more of a sense of safety and more of a feeling of home," he said.

Kaohsiung County government has "promised" to resolve the matter by helping Siaoilin Villagers in Shanlin find another location to rebuild, but no definite timetable has been set, says Hsu.

But a larger problem that needs to be addressed is the "mentality" of the central government and NGOs, said Lin Wan-i (林萬億), a sociology professor at National Taiwan University, who studies community organizations and worked with survivors of 1999's 921 Earthquake in Taipei County.

Lin says the reconstruction effort has largely been carried out from a "Han

Chinese point of view," and ignores the diverse needs of Taiwan's Aboriginal tribes. The Siaoilin villagers, who are Pingpu Aborigines, a group not officially recognized by the government as a tribe, are a case in point, Lin said.

"When you build a house, you have to talk with [the people that are going to live there], and ask them, 'What kind of place do you need?'" Lin said. "Why didn't they discuss with the Aborigines what kind of place they wanted? They have to be able to participate. They have to be able to communicate their expectations."

NGOS AND GOVERNMENT

In response to Lin and the Siaoilin villagers' criticisms, Chung Yi-jui, the Tzu Chi representative, says that all prospective residents were invited to preliminary meetings with the government and NGOs to discuss their needs prior to construction last year.

But Lin says the problems boil down to a flawed model whereby the government "dominates the reconstruction process" by mandating that the work be carried out by NGOs.

In turn, he says, NGOs like World Vision and Tzu Chi, which are accountable to their donors, are under pressure "to show results."

"So, in building houses — the government and the big NGOs — they used their own ideas to make decisions. They didn't necessarily consider what locals were really thinking," Lin said.

The government defends its practice of working with NGOs and aid groups, saying that it wanted to move quickly on building permanent housing.

This is one reason why the design of the housing was mainly left up to NGOs, according to Chang Cheng-wen (章正文), an official at the Morakot Post-Disaster Reconstruction Council (行政院莫拉克颱風災後重建推動委員會), the officially appointed body tasked with overseeing the recovery effort. He acknowledged that the process might have been "too fast."

"At the time, we were unsure of who the future [residents of the permanent housing] were, whether they were Aboriginal or Han Chinese," he told the *Taipei Times*.

Chang says the government also wanted to avoid problems similar to the reconstruction process after the 921 Earthquake, when several Aboriginal tribes had trouble obtaining loans to rebuild their homes.

The government intends to "change its methods" with ongoing housing projects, said Chang, including one in Taitung County where it "hopes to better accommodate Aboriginal needs."

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