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- Antique officials seek temporary halt to operations in Semirara mine

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By *Tara Yap*

ILOILO CITY – Local officials are urging the national government to temporarily order a halt to operations at the Semirara Mining and Power Corporation (SMPC), the country’s largest coalmine located in northern Antique province, where four workers have already tested positive for coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

“We are appealing. We want to avoid the spread of COVID-19,” Antique Governor Rhodora Cadiao told Manila Bulletin in a Tuesday phone interview.

Cadiao said she was issuing the appeal after Mayor Rigil Kent Lim of Caluya town, where SMPC is situated, has reportedly been having a hard time reaching national government officials to convey his concern over the COVID-19 situation in the island.

Semirara is classified as a coalmine reservation and under the jurisdiction of the Department of Energy (DOE).

The governor added that Antique Representative Loren Legarda also supported the call to temporary halt coalmining operations.

Cadiao noted that both the Antique provincial government and the Caluya local government do not have enough resources if the COVID-19 crisis in Semirara, which has a population of 21,169, worsens.

“If operations cannot be completely halted, SMPC should limit the movement of its workers to avoid infecting the rest of the people living in the island,” Cadiao emphasized.

Antique province recorded its first positive COVID-19 case last April 7. The first case was a 74-year-old man who flew to Semirara via private plane last March.

Last April 17, the Department of Health (DOH) confirmed that Semirara’s three new COVID-19 cases had close contact with the 74-year-old man. According to Cadiao, all four patients were working for a sub-contractor of SMPC.

While the four patients are already under strict isolation, local officials were still reportedly facing challenges with contact tracing.

The first patient had 53 contacts, but with the three succeeding patients, these contacts have ballooned to 198.

“But we are not sure if these are the real number of people the four men had contact with, or it could even be more,” noted Cadiao.

While SMPC has provided an isolation facility, the local government of Caluya was still requesting for a detailed contingency plan.

“We requested for its immediate remedial plans to contain [COVID-19],” said Lim in statement sent to Manila Bulletin.

For its part, the Caluya local government has released funding for food assistance to those affected by the community quarantine.

Geography also plays a factor in COVID-19 responses. Semirara is one of the three islands composing Caluya town.

Swab samples are taken by Antique Provincial Health Office personnel, who have to travel by land and sea for almost an entire day from San Jose de Buenavista, the provincial capital. The swab samples then have to be transported back to mainland Antique. From Antique, it has to be delivered to the DOH-accredited testing center in Iloilo City.

Meanwhile, the Caluya local government also clarified that it was the DOE that has authority in allowing foreign-flagged vessels to dock at Semirara. This came after concerns were raised with the presence of two Chinese vessels over the weekend.

For its part, the Caluya local government has initiated a protocol as early as January 2020 not to allow personnel of any foreign ship to disembark while loading coal supplies.

<https://news.mb.com.ph/2020/04/21/antique-officials-seek-temporary-halt-to-operations-in-semirara-mine/>