

Massacre at the mines

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Environment Secretary Gina Lopez ordered the closure of 21 mining companies and suspended the operation of seven with these words, “Water is life. We will not risk the water in the interest of businesses. In that line, we decided to close down any mining operation near functional water. No law proclaims watershed is functional. There can’t and must not have any kind of industrial (activity) near watersheds. Climate change is coming, water levels are coming down. It’s not acceptable. My issue is not about mining. My issue is about social justice. If businesses go to certain areas and they benefit from the resources of these areas, and the people who live there suffer, there’s social injustice.”

Recognizing that the nickel mines closed account for 50% of the country’s total production, Secretary Lopez remarked, “Who cares about GDP if people are suffering? We should increase GDP but it should come from a decent way.” I believe Secretary Gina Lopez is acting more like an anti-mining advocate than a secretary of environment and natural resources who needs to balance the interests of contending parties and act in the interest of the nation. Weighing strongly for just one side will have disastrous effects even on the poor that Secretary Lopez professes to serve. Is she prepared to provide jobs for the thousands of workers who will lose their daily livelihood because of the closure of the mines as well as the workers of support businesses that will suffer and eventually close?

The secretary hinges her order on the mining firms locating in these areas. These firms have been there for years and their presence has been cleared by previous administrations of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. Environmental assessment was carried out and permits granted to these firms with conditions on having anti-pollution mechanisms. The secretary should have issued together with the order any findings on the firms’ violation of these conditions rather than just on their mere location in these areas. It would have been better if the damage to the environment and most importantly the damage done to communities in the area were clearly specified.

The reason this was not done could be due to the fact that the report of the Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB) is, in the words of the secretary, “in contrast with the decision of DENR.” In fact, the secretary declined to provide the report. Is there a fear on her part that such a report done by technical experts, experienced and professional, will not support a decision which may most probably be based on a personal bias against the mining industry? For full transparency, the secretary should produce the report and give facts and analysis to debunk any of the findings and recommendations.

I am a strong proponent for the environment, dating from the time of Minister Jose Leido when I helped draft the Environment Code of the Philippines, the first in Asia. Together with Dr. Celso Roque, Dr. Rey Punungbayan, Dr. Ric Umali, and other scientists from the University of the Philippines (I was the only non-scientist, coming from the UP College of Business Administration), we were proud when then President Ferdinand Marcos issued the presidential decree. But being for the environment does not necessarily mean being anti-business.

It would have been better if Secretary Lopez provided specific reasons for the closure, set a timetable for such if the facts warranted (so that alternative livelihood could be arranged for those whose earnings will disappear), and helped these companies relocate to other mining sites. Since these companies established their mining operations in good faith, some form of compensatory relief should be provided them. Otherwise investors, not just in mining but also in other industries will be reluctant to invest in a country where the government

official's personal bias becomes the basis for decisions rather than the factual and well-studied analysis of professionals and technical experts.

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