

# DENR veers away from ‘antipeople, anti-environment’ policies of Aquino administration—green group

By Jonathan L. Mayuga

*Business Mirror*, December 26, 2016

ALTHOUGH bypassed by the Commission on Appointments (CA), Environment Secretary-designate Regina Paz L. Lopez continues to enjoy the support of environmental groups.

Lopez’s anticoal and antimining stance, they said, is of utmost importance to ensure the sustainable management of the country’s environment and natural resources.

No less than President Duterte, who claimed to have reappointed Lopez because of her incorruptibility, doubted that Lopez will ever get the confirmation.

Lopez, however, maintained that under her watch, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources’s (DENR) policy will be leaning favorably on the protection of the environment and ensuring that the exploitation of the natural resources will not cause suffering, but rather benefit the people in the communities.

Green groups believe that the government needs to back Lopez, if we are to take the low-carbon development path and fulfill the country’s various international commitments.

Not all, however, are excited with Lopez’s campaign. Other environmental groups have found Lopez’s action to be wanting, while doubting the Duterte administration’s sincerity in protecting the country’s environment and natural resources.

“As climate activists, [350.org](#) recognizes the progressive outcomes of Gina Lopez’s tenure as environment secretary. We believe that in such a short span of time, decisions done under her watch on issues such as mining and coal are examples of what can be done if the government would lead in advancing sustainability,” Chuck Baclagon of [350.org](#) Asia said.

“However, we feel that Lopez alone is not enough, as we need a government that puts people and the planet over profit. The current direction of the Department of Energy [DOE], which favors nuclear and coal, threatens the gains of DENR’s pro-environment positions,” he said.

[350.org](#) urged the DOE and the DENR to “stand with the people” in pursuing an energy-policy direction that seeks to keep fossil fuels in the ground.

“This is the best indicator of a country’s seriousness in dealing with the climate crisis,” he said.

According to Baclagon, such requires halting all new fossil-fuel development now.

“Should the construction of all coal plants in the pipeline push through, the Philippines would be locked into 20 to 40 years of coal dependence,” he said.

Red Constantino, executive director of the Institute for Climate and Sustainable Cities, said: “President Duterte could not have done better in appointing Gina Lopez as environment

secretary. She embodies the promise of this administration, with her bold, decisive, inclusive leadership. She has done far more in six months compared to what her predecessor accomplished in six years.”

Constantino said fighting for development and the environment together is massively difficult, but Lopez does it naturally with vision to boot.

“It is not only the Digong government that needs her voice. Our climate needs the fearless voice of Gina Lopez, as well. We applaud Secretary Lopez, along with [Finance] Secretary [Carlos] Dominguez and [Science] Secretary [Ernesto] Pernia, for championing together the ratification of the Paris Agreement and its goal to keep global warming below 1.5°C in Malacañang and Marrakech. We are hopeful that come next year she will work more cohesively with the Department of Finance, National Economic and Development Authority and even Department of Energy to bring about a more resilient, job-creating modern economy powered by clean energy and green investments,” he said.

Rodne Galicha of the Climate Reality Project said one of the best performing government agencies is the DENR.

“In fact, in just five months, the DENR delivered beyond what was promised by President Duterte. Here is an advocate-turned-government executive who opened wide the doors of the much criticized office to the masses,” he said.

Galicha said that, while passionate on the cause of the people she frequently visited before she assumed office, Lopez was able to articulate that her allegiance is to her mandate, the Constitution, general welfare and, above all, social justice.

However, Galicha said it is not only opening wide the doors of the DENR that needs to be done. He said the agency goes down to the masses—face to face in communities where it is most needed. With so much housekeeping and cleaning-up to be done within its ranks, which is a bigger challenge, the sustained engagement with civil society is a must in the spirit of participatory governance and transparency.

“I believe that those DENR officials who erred have been investigated and held accountable. It is understandable that five months is not enough to adjust in a very bureaucratic and controversial institution. However, having new and passionate people around her is very helpful.

“From the issues of climate change, mining to waste and coal-fired power plants, we hope to see more of her actions on reclamation and biodiversity conservation.

“We strongly recommend that the Biodiversity Management Bureau’s [BMB] power and budget shall be prioritized equally as other DENR’s line agencies,” Galicha said.

“We have seen BMB’s efforts to conserve, protect and rehabilitate our life-giving ecosystems, but its initiatives and programs have been suppressed by institutional limitations. Five years and six months more, there is more to be done at the DENR. Five years and six months more, there is more to be done at the DENR,” Galicha added.

Other groups, however, are slowly losing faith in Lopez.

Fernando Hicap of the Pambansang Lakas ng Kilusang Mamamalakaya said for the last few months, the DENR has put several large-scale mining companies to its curtain call through the appointment of the staunch antimining advocate.

He said that, while Lopez's appointment partially spared the fragile marine environment from rampant destructive mining, like offshore and magnetite mining, not every single mining firm has complied with the protocol due to lack of genuine policy that will stop and prohibit destructive and wanton mining operations.

"No amount of good deeds and pronouncements could prohibit greedy mining firms if the existing mining law, the Mining Act of 1995, which opened the floodgates for mining companies to plunder our resources, is still operational," said Hicap, Pamalakaya's national coordinator.

Hicap said the DENR should replace the existing mining law into a pro-environment and pro-people mining act, which will regulate unrestrained mining activities for the conservation of the environment and, most of all, will promote a self-reliant economy and boost domestic industrialization.

While Lopez's sincerity to preserve the environment is indisputable, Pamalakaya said it seems the new administration is only focused on mining activities as the main culprit behind environmental degradation and destruction.

"While the DENR is busy pinpointing large-scale mining firms, big developers, on the other hand, are on a killing spree converting coastal communities, fishing waters and other marine resources into mere private-business hubs, like eco-tourism, beach resorts, commercial and industrial districts," Hicap said.

These, Hicap added, displace fishermen, farmers and urban-poor families from their shelters. Worse, it also resulted to ecological imbalances and disturbances.

"The DENR should also look into the environmental effects of widespread reclamation, conversion and privatization of fishing waters and coastal areas. The fisherfolk, farmers and coastal settlers are the user-manager of marine environment, ejecting them from their only recourse means depriving them of their economic, social and political rights as a citizen, and letting the environment destroyed at the hands of the few profit-driven plunderers and developers," Hicap said.

Meanwhile, Hicap said the DENR's order to dismantle large fish pens in Laguna de Bay has yet to materialize.

"Its attached agency, the Laguna Lake Development Authority [LLDA], seems has its own regime for not complying with its mother department's order of making the 90,000-hectare brackish lake back in the hands of small fishermen again," Hicap said.

He said local chapters of Pamalakaya in Binangonan and Angono, both in Rizal province, which are located within the periphery of Laguna de Bay, claimed that the abolition of fish pens was only *ningas cogon* and media projection.

“A report from a fisherman in Binangonan said LLDA officials once postured to abolish an individually owned lone fish pen when a mainstream media outlet requested coverage of a fishpen demolition. Up to now, however, no report from the LLDA has ever been made on the status of fishpen dismantling.

“Thousands of hectares of Laguna de Bay are still occupied by enclosed fish pens owned by large-scale fishing firms and individuals. The fish pen invasion in Laguna de Bay narrows the fishing zone of municipal fishermen that used to be communal and open fishing grounds before. It also damages the Laguna de Bay through its chemical-based pellet-feeds used to culture fish,” Hicap said.

The DENR also failed to prevent reclamation activities in some parts of the lake, Hicap added.

Citing data from LLDA, since 2012, 151.64 hectares of Laguna Lake have been reclaimed with some areas used as landfill combinations of toxic industrial, domestic and bio-hazard waste. Big portions of the reclaimed areas are in Taguig, while some are scattered in other parts of the provinces of Laguna and in Rizal, like Taytay, Angono and Binangonan. Some of the reclamation projects are supported by local governments. DENR’s initiatives to protect the environment will just turn into a mere lip service if existing anti-environmental policies and programs remain intact. Only by transforming those lip services into concrete environmental policies can the DENR really advance its mandate in protecting the environment for the benefit of the Filipino people.

Clemente Bautista, national coordinator of Kalikasan-PNE, said the group had high hopes that the new administration will veer away from what he described as “antipeople and anti-environment policies and programs” of the previous Aquino administration.

“Given his positive record as a mayor in supporting lumad struggle in Mindanao and in banning mining and chemical pesticide aerial spraying in Davao City, Kalikasan and other environmental organizations formed Eco-Challenge for Change Coalition outlining the major ecological demands and actions it wants to see from the Duterte administration,” Bautista said.

While he said the first 100 days of the new administration was off to a good start, almost half year into his term, the issue of human-rights violations escalates not only to Duterte’s war campaign on drugs, but had also victimized environmental activists.

“We recorded at least seven environmentalists as victims of extrajudicial killings. Most of them are anti-mining and land-defenders activists. Militarization continues in rural areas, especially in areas affected by mining, agricultural plantations and commercial logging. On December 12 seven peasants who were defending their lands were shot and wounded by security guards of Lapanday Food Corp. [LFC]. LFC is a multibillion-peso agricultural plantation company,” Bautista lamented.

He said erring companies supposedly suspended by the DENR continue to operate.

Bautista said the Laguna de Bay is still occupied by private corporations and individuals.

Worse, Bautista said the Duterte administration promoted and approved the expansion of palm-oil plantation in Mindanao and the establishment of new coal power plants nationwide.

Meanwhile, reclamation of coastal and lakeshore still is the order of the day under Duterte.

“No significant change. If there are, it is just for show. *Pang-gulat at pambulag lamang*. The people remain wanting. In the first few months of 2017, we will know truly what kind of government we have under President Duterte. Is it for the people, like what he promised us? Does the new administration really hate oligarchs, or is it run by oligarchs?” he said.