

HEADLINES

DENR to form new bureau to enforce environmental laws

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Tunnels dug by small-scale miners near the Philippine Military Academy compound in Baguio City are guarded by soldiers as the government starts its crackdown on illegal mining operations. KARLSTON LAPNITEN

BAGUIO CITY — Environment Secretary Roy Cimatu on Wednesday said he would form a bureau to enforce environmental laws with the assistance of personnel from the military, police and National Bureau of Investigation, and government prosecutors.

Cimatu said the task force on illegal mining that was launched here would be the precursor of his proposed environmental protection and enforcement bureau.

Polluters

He said the bureau would be empowered to arrest and prosecute violators, and confiscate and destroy structures and equipment used to pollute the environment.

The National Task Force Mining Challenge, formed on Jan. 26 to stop illegal mining nationwide, fired the opening salvo on Saturday with the closure of 18 pocket mines in areas near the Philippine Military Academy (PMA) here.

“The Department of Environment and Natural Resources lacks enforcement. We have laws but we have a hard time implementing them,” said Cimatu, who accompanied the task force, headed by Undersecretary Rodolfo Garcia, in blasting mine tunnels in Barangay Kias near PMA.

Families who operated these mines protested the closure. Arnold Papay Sr., a member of the Papay clan, said the tunnels were within their land claim that dated back to 1940. He said only eight tunnels were being used when the task force closed their operations.

‘Minahang Bayan’

According to him, the clan has filed an application to operate a Minahang Bayan but it has yet to be approved by the government. A Minahang Bayan is a designated zone where small-scale miners may operate and where environmentally secured mineral processing facilities may be installed.

Although the Mines and Geosciences Bureau has processed 79 Minahang Bayan applications for the Cordillera, including Benguet province, none has been approved.

Garcia, who also heads the pollution adjudication board, said the crackdown on illegal mining was meant to preserve the environment and to prevent operators of these mines from financing the activities of the New People’s Army. —*Karlston Lapniten and*

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