

HEADLINES

Zone for pocket miners to rise in Benguet town

Cimatu says 'Minahang Bayan' in Itogon to observe safety measures, accommodate 1,000 small-scale mining workers

By: [Karlston Lapniten](#) - [@inquirerdotnet](#)
[Philippine Daily Inquirer](#) / 05:10 AM October 18, 2018

TUNNEL LIFE Pocket miners take a break at a tunnel entrance in the mining community of Antamok in Itogon, Benguet. RICHARD BALONGLONG

BAGUIO CITY — Environment Secretary Roy Cimatu on Wednesday said a “Minahang Bayan” (people’s mine) would soon be put up at the mining town of Itogon, Benguet province, and may be named “Ompong” after Typhoon “Ompong” (international name: Mangkhut), whose rains and winds buried 114 people, mostly small-scale miners, in September.

Addressing about 5,000 pocket miners who gathered for a dialogue at the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) office here, Cimatu said, “Our intention was never to stop you.”

ADVERTISEMENT

He was referring to a Cordillera-wide ban on small-scale mining, which he imposed days after Ompong triggered the landslides at Barangay Ucab in Itogon.

The proposed Minahang Bayan for Benguet, the first for the Cordillera region, could accommodate 1,000 miners, Cimatu said.

Consent

A Minahang Bayan is a zone segregated exclusively for small-scale miners where tunneling and controlled mineral processing will be concentrated.

Benguet Corp., the country's oldest mining company, gave its formal consent to the conversion of its property into a Minahang Bayan.

It was applied for by the Loacan Itogon Pocket Miners Association but the Minahang Bayan would take in other groups granted mining permits by the Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB).

These groups included 12 associations whose temporary mining permits were revoked when Cimatu ordered the mining ban.

Cimatu directed the provincial mining regulatory board, chaired by MGB, to convene and declare Benguet a Minahang Bayan.

He also urged the miners to consider naming the proposed 80-hectare people's mine at Barangay Loacan in honor of those who died in the landslides.

ADVERTISEMENT

At the suggestion of Elizabeth Arsi, 69, of Barangay Dalicno, the miners agreed to call the mine Ompong, but Cimatu said that could change.

MINE PATROL Soldiers and policemen patrol a mining area in Itogon town, Benguet, to ensure that a ban on small-scale mining imposed by the environment department is followed. — KARLSTON LAPNITEN

Ban lifting

With almost the entire villages of Ucab and Loacan declared critical areas, Cimatu also reiterated that no houses should be built within and along the Minahang Bayan.

The mine ban had affected 12,000 miners and 100,000 of their dependents, according to a petition filed by the pocket miners.

Cimatu said the putting up of the Minahang Bayan would lift the mining ban. “[But] regulatory measures through the Minahang Bayan need to be in effect first for the miners’ own safety. We do not want to be digging for bodies as we did recently,” he said.

Climate change

He said the Minahang Bayan should not operate during storms or heavy rains. “Climate change now affects us. We have stronger rains and winds than before. We don’t want another Ompong tragedy,” he said.

The pocket miners offered to participate in a stewardship agreement to help a government reforestation program for landslide areas. They also promised to sell gold to the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas.

But the groups urged Cimatu to dismiss the cases filed against miners caught violating the ban and to allow them to process stockpiled ore seized by the DENR in a recent crackdown.

Read more: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1044259/zone-for-pocket-miners-to-rise-in-benguet-town#ixzz5W9MtkZzk>

Follow us: [@inquirerdotnet on Twitter](#) | [inquirerdotnet on Facebook](#)