

A Philippine island locked down, but its mine didn't — and infections mounted

by Jun N. Aguirre on 18 May 2020

- *Activists, clergy and politicians have demanded an investigation into the continued coal-mining activity on the Philippine island of Semirara while the region was supposed to be under strict quarantine.*
- *The first case on the island, and in the province of Antique, came from mine operator SMPC's hospital and was confirmed on April 7; as of May 12, there are nine cases believed to have come from Semirara.*
- *Between the first case and May 15, when Semirara was under enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) and mining activity was therefore not permitted, SMPC reportedly continued operating, including loading a foreign vessel with coal for export.*
- *The company says it acted in accordance with the government's COVID-19 protocols and in coordination with the relevant agencies.*

ANTIQUE, Philippines — Calls are mounting for an investigation into ongoing coal-mining activity on Semirara Island in the central Philippines, amid a series of confirmed COVID-19 cases originating from the site.

Reports from the regional health department indicate that Antique province, where the island is located, registered its first COVID-19 case on April 7, with the patient coming from Semirara, a remote island accessible only by charter plane or motorboat.

Provincial health officer Ric Noel Nacionayo said the 74-year-old male patient was originally from Metro Manila and arrived at the Semirara Mining and Power Corporation (SMPC) mine on March 4. He sought treatment at the SMPC hospital on March 19 for COVID-19-like symptoms and was immediately tested before being confirmed as having the infectious disease on April 7.

Since then, local authorities in Semirara imposed an enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) to contain the spread of the virus. Under an ECQ, only necessary businesses can operate. This doesn't include mining. The ECQ

remained in place until May 15, after which it was downgraded to a general community quarantine (GCQ), which does allow for mining activity.

But in the time that the ECQ was in force, and when mining was ostensibly on hold, two more cases were recorded from Semirara, where SMPC has since 1999 operated one of the biggest open-pit coal mines in Asia. Confirmed on April 17, both patients were co-workers of the first patient.

On April 20, the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Antique reached nine: four from the municipality of Caluya, which includes Semirara, and five from the municipality of Pandan on the Antique mainland. The Pandan cases reportedly originated from Semirara. Throughout the ECQ period, groups reported private planes, motorboats and vessels loading coal for export to China continuing to ply the mine.

As of May 12, Antique province had 17 confirmed coronavirus cases, nine of them from Semirara. Contact tracing is underway, according to the provincial health office.

"I believe the COVID-19 cases were the result of the unhampered operation of the SMPC," said Virgilio "Bong" Sanchez, president of the Save Antique Movement (SAM). "There are few health officers on the island monitoring the health protocol of the workers. Crews from the boats fetching the coal were not being examined."

Edione Febrero, priest director of the Diocesan Social Action Center, said his organization had sent a letter, dated April 24, to the Department of Energy (DOE) and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), asking them to look into the ongoing coal mining operation in Semirara.

"It is most grievous that the COVID-19 pandemic befalls us now," Febrero said. "In view of this, the Roman Catholic Diocese of San Jose de Antique strongly appeals to the DOE, DENR, the provincial government and the local government of Caluya to stop the coal mining and shipment operations in Semirara and to order all foreign ships to immediately return to their ports of origin until no new infections are recorded from the island and from ports of origin mentioned, confirmed patients have fully recovered, and all confirmed cases are closed."

The Philippine Movement for Climate Justice (PMJC) also joined the mounting calls to investigate the operations, saying SMPC violated the Philippines' "Bayanihan We Heal as One Act" by not enforcing physical distancing in the workplace. PMJC said the shipping of mining materials and goods by a foreign vessel for export constituted a non-essential service in the time of COVID-19. Allowing foreign vessels during a period of nationwide lockdown defeats the purpose of the Bayanihan Act, it added.

Loren Legarda, a congresswoman representing Antique, has also called for an investigation into the operations of the SMPC mine. "I want a full blown investigation into semirara coal mining, the entry of Chinese vessels, previous deaths caused by unsafe mine operations, possible violations of health protocols during covid, transparency in using national wealth funds," she tweeted on April 19. She also called for the island to be on lockdown.

Antique Governor Rhodora Cadio said her government does not have a hand in SMPC's operation during the ECQ. "Our role is to only monitor the environmental standards of their operation," she said. "In case of a complaint filed for alleged violations, we refer it directly to the DENR."

In a statement, SMPC said the docking and continuing operation of foreign vessels on the island are in accordance with the government's COVID-19 protocols and carried out in coordination with concerned agencies. It said it had since February prohibited crew members of foreign vessels from disembarking, in compliance with the "no disembarkation" policy enforced by local authorities. All those involved in operations follow health guidelines, including social distancing, wearing of masks and hazardous material suits, SMPC said.

But Sanchez said residents are afraid to complain against SMPC. "They are afraid they will be reprimanded by the local government," he said.

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