

Harboring a deviant

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Environment Secretary Gina Lopez made sure that everybody knows of her being an iconoclast Cabinet member by offering to commission members of the New People’s Army (NPA) to, in effect, oversee the operations of mining firms while obviously throwing roadblocks to the review of the closure orders on mining projects.

Lopez stunned the public when she said she is willing to cooperate with communist rebels to protect the environment.

The problem with Lopez’s idea is that the communist rebels have been torching equipment of legitimate businesses that refuse to pay what they call revolutionary taxes, although this is extortion, plain and simple.

In a business forum, Lopez said she is willing to allow the NPA to participate in development projects for mining communities in Agusan del Norte.

“What I’ve seen with the NPA, they just really want to get people out of poverty, they’re really not bad people,” Lopez said. Gee, Gina, killers, kidnappers and extortionists are not “bad people” but miners are?

Her idea surely does not jibe with the NPA character of refusing to give up

their extortion activities which Rody sought as part of the peace negotiations ongoing between the government and the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP).

“They’re really nice if you meet them... My hope there is we do it in one place, we’ve done it everywhere,” she added.

Lopez may just as well say the government agrees to sharing power with the rebel group which has sought to put up a communist system through the power of the gun.

Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) founding chairman Jose Maria Sison, as expected, welcomed in a statement Lopez’s offer.

Lopez, while playing footsies with the NPA, moved to block a plea of the Department of Finance (DoF)-led Mining Industry Coordinating Council (MICC) for the government to allocate P50 million to review the mine closures ordered by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). Finance Assistant Secretary Paola Alvarez said most of the agencies in MICC were perplexed at the reason Lopez wanted “to throw a monkey wrench” into the MICC-approved review of all mining operations by opposing the budgetary support of P50 million the body had asked the Department of Budget and Management (DBM).

Alvarez said that the action of Lopez was considered inconsistent with the order of Rody in a Cabinet meeting last February 7 for the review of the DENR order.

In an MICC meeting, she herself formally approved such an MICC review by signing MICC Resolution 6 during the Council’s meeting.

On the P50-million budgetary support, Alvarez recalled that “Lopez had also green-lighted this request to the DBM during the follow-up MICC meeting last February 20, as the council would need to hire a sufficient number of private experts from different fields to review the technical, legal, social, environmental and economic aspects of all 311 mining contracts in the country.”

Lopez also demanded that Finance Undersecretary Bayani Agabin to inhibit from the MICC process supposedly due to his past ties to mining companies. Alvarez said “Secretary Lopez is free to make such an appeal, in the same manner that certain groups are free to oppose her confirmation by the Commission on Appointments on a conflict-of-interest issue and other grounds.”

Agabin worked for the Philippine Associated Smelting & Refining Corp. 15 years ago and with Rapu Rapu Minerals Inc. 10 years ago.

“Perhaps, it is the DENR secretary who needs to refuse herself from the MICC process, given that she has publicly stated that she would stick to the findings of the DENR’s audit report regardless of the outcome of the MICC review

ordered by the President,” Alvarez said.

She said the recruitment of the experts who will conduct the review is a multi-agency process of which the DoF is a part of, as so mandated by Executive Order 79 that then-President Aquino issued in 2012 creating the MICC.

“The DoF cannot be excluded from this process, as it does not of itself face any conflict of interest, without violating its mandate under EO 79,” she said.

The MICC is mandated under EO 79 to review all mining-related rules and regulations, issuances and agreements, and was ordered convened by the President during the February 7 Cabinet meeting to discuss and reassess the DENR’s audit last year.

Lopez’s presence continues to weigh heavily on the whole Cabinet if not the whole nation, due to her insistence of pushing her advocacy even at the cost of the government’s interest.

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