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# A nightmare that must never happen again

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In Photo: Bluish-green water buildup at the tailings dam atop the mine of Marcopper continue to pose grave danger to communities in Mogpoc, Santa Cruz and Boac in the province of Marinduque.

Onboard a military helicopter, Environment Secretary Regina Paz L. Lopez showed journalists the damage caused by what is considered the worst mining disaster in the Philippines—and why she is against irresponsible mining.

Lopez has repeatedly said she is not antimining but is definitely against irresponsible mining, which companies rake huge profit while people in the communities suffer.

Marinduque, once a host to a large-scale copper mine, changed the lives of its residents, who have since been waking up every day to a reminder of the nightmare that happened more than 21 years ago.

After the 1996 Marcopper Mining Corp. disaster, the Boac River, which used to support life in Marinduque, has yet to recover. Considered a dead river, its water was no longer flowing.

The entire 27-kilometer Boac River showed no sign of life when a leak from one of the mine's tailings pond dumped around 3 million tons to 4 million tons of mine waste into the Makulapnit Creek, leading to the river and burying corals and seagrass.

This prompted the government to stop the operation of the Marcopper and shut it down for good.

Although some portions of the Boac River have started to recover—with some fish miraculously reappearing—most of its parts along Mogpog and Santa Cruz towns appear to be nothing more than a body of mud. The once mighty river of life was turned into a small stream.

Today, water flowing in the river remains unsafe. The huge volume of water in the abandoned mine that have accumulated over the years created what appears to be man-made lake filled with acidic, bluish-green water.

### **Protecting water**

Lopez, an environmental advocate before she took the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) post, had ordered the closure or suspension of 28 large-scale mining operations after a mine audit last year and canceled 75 mining contracts near or within watersheds to protect the country's water supply.

She said what happened in Marinduque should never happen anywhere else, vowing not to allow irresponsible mining operations to cause irreversible environmental damage that will cause suffering to people in mining communities.

The entire country is basically a watershed. The Philippines has 412 principal river basins in 119 proclaimed watersheds. There are 19 major river basins.

Last year Lopez issued an order to stop all fish-cage and fish-pen operations within the Laguna de Bay, the country's largest freshwater lake as the DENR and the Laguna Lake Development Authority (LLDA) move to restore its pristine state.

Lopez also canceled the environmental compliance certificates (ECC) of a real-estate and property developer for a housing project within the La Mesa Watershed to protect the integrity of the ecosystem, where water for 12 million residents of Metro Manila and nearby areas are stored and treated before distribution as tap water.

“Water is life. Profit is not important than water,” Lopez has said.

The policy against irresponsible and destructive mining and other development projects, she said, aims to protect the country’s precious water resources for the present and future generations.

### **Dead river**

People in Marinduque used to depend on the Boac River for subsistence and livelihood. Children used to swim and bathe during summer, while women used to wash clothes because clean water used to flow in the river.

It provides fish, shrimps and shell-food, an unlimited supply of water for domestic use and irrigation for their farms and livestock.

Not anymore.

Tens of thousands of trees were killed near the riverbanks as the raging mudflow swept them away, Beth Manggol, executive director of the Marinduque Council for Environmental Concerns (MaCEC) told the BusinessMirror in Filipino. The natural flow of the river was also altered as it expanded on both sides.

MaCEC was established, precisely because of the Marcopper mining disaster, to fight mining’s evil, Manggol said.

### **Livelihood lost**

Even before the disastrous leak that also displaced an entire barangay and forced the evacuation in 21 others, people claimed to have been suffering because of the mining operation.

“Fish catch went down, our fishing ground were destroyed, and many of our neighbors fell ill because of exposure to toxic chemicals,” said Sabino Raginio, a resident of Barangay Ipil, Santa Cruz, Marinduque.

The president of the Samahan ng Maliliit na Mangingisda sa Barangay Ipil, Raginio said since the mining disaster, the living condition worsened.

“We had to fetch water by walking several kilometers to where water is not contaminated. Our farms were destroyed and we had to go farther away to fish because we are afraid that we might catch contaminated ones,” he said. “It’s hard but we were able to survive.”

Before the disaster, he said, his fish trap, or *baklad*, can produce about 10 kilos of fish a day. It means food on the table and a little extra for rice and other food items.

### **Health problems**

More than 100 people have suffered from chronic diseases owing to exposure to toxic heavy metals. Arsenic, lead, cadmium, copper and mercury were traced in the victims’ system.

In 1998 then-President Fidel V. Ramos declared a state of calamity in four barangays near the Calancan Bay, namely, Botilao, Ipil, Lusok and Camandugan, because of high incidence of heavy-metal poisoning among children. More than 10 of those exposed to toxic heavy metals have died since.

According to Lopez, she received reports that 78 people are suffering from brain problems, while other victims continue to complain of spending huge amounts of money for treatment and medication of the health problems they had to endure.

## **A grim reminder**

Manggol said the Marcopper mining disaster is a grim reminder of the risk of large-scale mining.

“Now that fish have reappeared in some portions of the Boac River, we are afraid of what may happen to those who have decided to catch and eat them,” she said.

Some residents are no longer afraid of catching and eating fish from the Boac River, thinking that it is already safe.

“We want the Department of Health [DOH] to visit and check the condition of the people because we are sure they will soon suffer the same fate [falling ill] others have experienced,” she said.

The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR), she said, has yet to conduct tests on the fish caught in the Boac River, too.

Eating fish—whether from the river or the nearby fishing ground where Marcopper dumped its mineral-ore stockpile—is believed to be the source of toxic poisoning that caused people in at least three towns in Marinduque near the mine to fall ill.

## **Escaping responsibility**

Since Marcopper started operation in 1975—20 years before the Philippine Mining Act of 1995 became a law—the company is oblivious of its social responsibility, including implementing appropriate final mine closure and rehabilitation plan.

The Marcopper continues to dodge responsibility, according to Manggol, to compensate the victims of the disaster and to rehabilitate the areas it destroyed.

Under the mining Act, the government requires mining companies to create a special fund and deposit a certain amount for the company's final mine closure and rehabilitation—to guarantee that they will not escape responsibility.

Mining companies are also required to set aside at least 1.5 percent of their total operating budget to help host communities under the Social Development Management Program (SDMP).

After being ordered to stop operations, Marcopper simply packed up, abandoned its mine and fled.

### **Reef to ridge damage**

The damage caused by the Marcopper mining disaster was enormous, said Imelda M. Diaz, Marinduque Provincial Environment and Natural Resources officer. “When it happened, you can just imagine the damage it has caused. It was not just the trees [that were damaged], but an entire ecosystem. Even coastal and marine ecosystems were destroyed. The mangroves, seagrass and corals were destroyed,” Diaz said.

The damage caused by the leak, she said, was well documented, explaining why Marinduqueños were emotional about their tragic fate because of irresponsible mining.

Until now, even after it stopped operating, Marcopper continues to wreak havoc.

### **Restricted area**

Even after the mine was already abandoned, it remains a restricted area that even DENR personnel are not allowed to enter the area, more so to rehabilitate it, Diaz said.

“Even if we wanted to do something, we are not allowed to enter the mines,” she said.

Marcopper, people in affected communities have lamented, has appeared to have no intention of cleaning up its mess in Marinduque.

She said unlike in other areas where the DENR can do reforestation work, the mining area remains idle. Like a ticking time bomb, it can explode anytime and cause yet another disaster.

### **Constant threat**

Diaz said in 2011 samples in some portion of Boac River shows improved water quality.

However, she warned that the threat of water contamination remains because of the existence of three large dams filled with contaminated water atop nearby hills.

“Anytime, we fear that one of these dams may collapse. There is a move to analyze the integrity of the dams because it really scares people, especially during heavy rains,” she said.

A bluish-green water has been monitored flowing into the tributaries of the Boac River anew. The water is an acid-mine drain from mine tailings piled at the Bol River dam, one of three dams in the mine. The other two are the Makulapnit and Maguila-guila dams, which gave in in 1996.



Experts said an acid-mine drain is natural and occurs, especially in areas with large deposits of copper.

Copper ore, when submerged in water, becomes acidic. It turns water into bluish-green. “I really wouldn’t recommend eating fish from the river because it is not safe unless they are tested and declared as safe for human consumption by concerned authorities,” Diaz said.

She said unless the water in the tailings pond is removed and the area rehabilitated, the threat of disaster remains.

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