

‘Kalikasan’ environmental protection group backs DENR, calls for new mining policy

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BARREN WASTE – Nothing but parched land remains of the area of operations in Sta. Cruz, Zambales, of nickel-ore mining company Zambales Diversified Metals Corporation, which was ordered closed by Environment Secretary Gina Lopez last February 6. (Reuters)

Following the government’s crackdown on mining activities, environment advocates appealed to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) yesterday to take the next important step and support calls for a new mining policy.

“(DENR) Secretary (Gina) Lopez must work with Congress to push for House Bill 2715, the People’s Mining Bill, to replace the Mining Act of 1995 that is the root of these problems,” Kalikasan National Coordinator Clemente Bautista said.

“A new progressive mining policy will strengthen the mandate of the current thrust to effectively regulate mining and balance environmental protection, national development, and people’s rights,” he said.

Bautista lauded the DENR’s move to cancel 75 mining agreements located inside watershed areas.

“By removing the threats of forest denudation, water pollution, marine degradation, and biodiversity loss posed by impacts of large-scale mining, we are assured our agriculture and fisheries productivity can be better developed,” he said. “Maintaining healthy watersheds in these areas will guarantee that our population will have adequate, clean, and safe water supply for irrigation and domestic water needs.”

Two weeks after releasing the results of the DENR mining audit, Lopez announced last Tuesday the cancellation of a total of 75 mineral production sharing agreements (MPSAs) in watersheds all over the country.

According to DENR, there are 37 MPSAs in Mindanao, 11 in Visayas, and 27 in Luzon that will be cancelled.

“If we can maintain our remaining forests intact and our rivers free of siltation from mining operations, there is lesser likelihood of flashfloods and landslides during heavy rainfall and typhoons,” Bautista said.

“The crackdown of DENR Secretary Lopez against erring large-scale mines and the junking of MPSAs in the watershed areas are excellent actions for environmental protection,” he added.

The group urged other government offices to work with the DENR to cushion the immediate impacts of the mining crackdown to its workers by providing aid and alternative livelihood.

“The P2-billion aid announced by President Rodrigo Duterte for displaced mine workers can be coursed through the Department of Social Welfare and Development. Agencies for rural development such as the Department of Agriculture and Department of Agrarian Reform can help mining communities by distributing land and support services to the displaced mining communities,” he said.

Collateral damage

Meanwhile, a worker at the nickel mine operated by Eramen Minerals, Inc., near Sta. Cruz, Zambales, that was initially suspended in July for environmental offenses, and later ordered to shut for good, was found dead and hanging in his kitchen. A laptop charger cable was tied around his neck.

His brother had kept on telling Winston Ordonez that the mine would reopen and he would be hired again: but when Ordonez didn't get a call from the mining firm, he was later found hanging.

“He became depressed. He said his life was worthless,” his widow, Leni Modelo, told Reuters from their home where she is now raising their seven-year-old boy on her own. “He tried to find work in city hall but there was none.”

The Philippines is the world's top nickel ore supplier and China's huge demand for the raw material that makes stainless steel meant there was a captive market for the four big mines in the Sta. Cruz area.

But the suspension and closure of the mines by Lopez has meant thousands of jobs have disappeared in Sta. Cruz. A crusader for the environment, Lopez has ordered the shutdown of 23 of the country's 41 operating mines. She stepped up her crackdown on Tuesday, cancelling almost a third of the country's contracts for undeveloped mines.

The mining sector employed 219,000 people as of end-September last year, according to government data. But the planned closures and the suspension of another five mines will affect about 1.2 million people, including families and businesses that rely on mining for a livelihood, according to Artemio Disini, head of the Chamber of Mines of the Philippines.

At Eramen's mine, company president Enrique Fernandez said the headcount had dropped to 150 from more than 1,000 previously and more workers could go by the end of this month.

In a nearby mine run by Zambales Diversified Metals Corp. (ZDMC), owned by property-to-power firm DMCI Holdings, Inc., the number of workers has fallen to under 50 from a peak of 1,200, said Hendrik Martin, manager at ZDMC.

Ronald Esquiray, 39, was among those laid off. He now weaves bamboo strips to make walls for small huts, which pays half of what he used to earn in a day.

Many who lost their jobs tried their luck in Manila, Esquiray said, including his 20-year-old son who found work at a construction project.

Residents hit mines

Many residents of Sta. Cruz won't miss the mining. They say it denuded mountains, leading to heavy flooding in valley villages. Locals also blame the mines for the siltation of farmlands and rivers, and the destruction of the main road that heavy trucks used to rumble along carrying ore to the port.

Martin from ZDMC said mining is demonized so routinely in sermons at his local church that he has stopped attending the weekly service.

When it rains heavily here, thick mud rolls down from mine sites in the mountains, contaminating farmlands and streams below with nickel laterite ore.

Mining companies scrape the laterite off planting areas, but farmers and residents say it is only pushed to the side, submerging parts of houses. And the crop yield is far smaller than before, forcing farmers to use more fertilizer.

Rice farmer Eduardo Morano lost money on his last crop as the harvest from his one-hectare plot more than halved. "I had to sell one of my animals to pay off debt. Then I had to take a new loan to buy more fertilizer," he said.

The siltation has spread to rivers, said Edgardo Obra, vice chairman of the Concerned Citizens of Santa Cruz, pointing to one that he says had almost dried up because of the silt. "Kids used to dive here."

Fishermen have to go farther into sea due to the sediment build-up closer to land, he said, adding that only a few town officials benefit from the funds allocated by mining companies to help communities around them.

"I feel like we were fooled," said Obra, a Baptist pastor. As a former village official, he approved mining in the area but was dismayed two years later by the environmental damage. (With a report from Reuters)

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