

2 more mining operations shut down

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The government has closed down two more mining operations as it continued its crackdown on mining firms violating environmental laws.

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) on Thursday announced that Benguet Corporation has been ordered to cease operations in Benguet province and the Ore Asia Mining and Development Corporation in Bulacan.

The two firms join the list of 21 operations ordered stopped by DENR Secretary Gina Lopez, mostly for operating near functional watersheds.

Lopez has ordered 41 metal mines around the country audited for violations.

Five companies — Oceana Gold Philippines, Inc., Lepanto Consolidated Mining, Citinickel Mines and Development Corp., Berong Nickel Corp., and Strong Built Mining Development Corp. — remain suspended.

The DENR said it started issuing suspension and closure orders to the mining firms Thursday. It said the companies can appeal the orders.

On Friday, Speaker Pantaleon Alvarez led congressional leaders in assuring Lopez they fully support her decision to shut down or suspend mining firms, some of which are allegedly owned by influential politicians.

Alvarez said a radio interview Lopez's decision is justified despite warnings from the mining industry that the crackdown will trigger massive unemployment and worsen poverty in mining communities.

Alvarez said the DENR chief is correct in penalizing mining firms that violate environmental laws, saying it must be done no matter who gets hurt.

He said he has not been approached by anyone for help to stop Lopez, but stressed that he would reject such requests.

He said there is no lobby for the rejection of Lopez's confirmation as DENR secretary before the Commission on Appointments.

Bayan Muna Rep. Isagani Zarate, chairman of the Committee on Natural Resources, called for the swift enforcement of the DENR suspension and closure orders of companies that have caused massive damage to the environment and the livelihood of people.

"The constant monitoring of the five suspended mines should also be done for them to strictly comply with environmental laws," Zarate said in a statement.

"All the concerned companies should now also be ordered to pay for the damages and compensation for those affected by their destructive operations and for the rehabilitation of the areas," he said

He added: "Massive environmental destruction can be stopped or at least drastically minimized by overhauling environmental and mining laws through the junking of the Mining Act of 1995. Now is the time to replace the current mining regime with a new one, like House Bill 2715 or the People's Mining Bill now being deliberated in Congress."

Lopez has also earned the backing of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP).

Father Edu Gariguez, executive secretary of the CBCP's social action arm, the National Secretariat for Social Action Justice & Peace, lauded the decision of the DENR for choosing to protect the environment over business interest.

"No administration in the past had seriously address this issue of ecological protection," Gariguez said in an interview.

"By keeping Secretary Gina Lopez at the helm of DENR, the administration is making a clear statement in favor of the protection of the environment over business interest," he added.

Even the order of President Duterte for a total log ban earned praise from the priest.

"We affirm and commend Duterte's administration for its policy direction that protects our fragile ecosystems threatened by large scale mining and logging," Gariguez said.

He urged the government to find jobs for mining workers displaced by the closure and suspension orders.

"But we just can't continue the distorted policy of destroying the environment in order to provide jobs," Gariguez said.

Duterte ordered the total log ban following the massive flooding in Mindanao last month.

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