

Lopez vows to create green jobs for workers displaced by mines closure

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MANILA, Philippines— Environment Secretary Gina Lopez on Wednesday vowed to transform mining communities affected by her unprecedented closure order on 23 mines in the Caraga region, promising to create green jobs for workers displaced by the shutdown.

Before a hearing of the Senate’s labor committee, Lopez told committee chair Sen. Joel Villanueva that she would kickstart ecotourism opportunities in affected communities in the Dinagat Islands and Surigao del Norte to catch workers who have lost their livelihood after she ordered the closure of 23 large-scale mines in the region.

“I commit to taking care of all these people, plus plus...,” Lopez told the committee at a hearing Wednesday afternoon.

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She said government should look at industries other than mining to create jobs for locals, noting at how little the roughly century-old mining industry in the Philippines contributes to the local and national economy.

The Philippines is the fifth most mineralized country in the world and is the planet’s top nickel producer, but firms take 82 percent of the profits, and nearly all of the money “goes out of the local economy, Lopez said.

“You go figure. In Caraga, there are 26 mining companies, and it’s still the poorest region! If mining is so good, why for heaven’s sake is Caraga so poor?” she said in an impassioned presentation at the Senate.

“We’ve been mining this country for more than 100 years, what do we have to show (for it)? All the areas where we have mining are the poorest,” she said.

She cited how ecotourism could instead supplant mining in the environmentally vulnerable mine areas, citing the example of a project she had initiated at Ugong Rock in Puerto Princesa as a private sector endeavor. She said the town's earnings had increased from P7,000 to P29 million over the last decade.

“Why not give it (mine communities) a chance to breathe and create other kinds of jobs? I feel it behooves on government to make the right choice which could create the greatest common good,” she said.

An estimated 19,000 direct hires of the shut mining firms are affected by Lopez's order, according to Nelia Halcon, executive vice president of the Chamber of Mines of the Philippines.

Halcon said this figure swells to 194,000 if other sectors are included: indirect hires, or those subcontracted at mine sites for administrative roles, construction and other operations; induced employment workers, such as those working in businesses that sprout around mine areas; and miners' families.

Lopez said the Department of Environment and Natural Resources has an available P8 billion to create ecological zones across the country.

Villanueva meanwhile said he would hold Lopez to her promise.

“I will hold her accountable on her commitment to create green livelihood for the affected communities. We will also review existing policies and formulate new ones to ensure we have just transition towards a green economy and we have a mechanism to support DENR's decision,” the senator said.

“We still have 19,000 people who will lose their jobs. We need to build the capacity of our workers as we transition to a greener economy,” he told the Inquirer. *JE*

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