

Cimatu pleads for time on mine closure review

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Newly appointed environment secretary Roy Cimatu assured he will follow the rule of law in protecting the country's natural resources but needs time "to learn the ropes" as he assumes office.

Cimatu's appointment was welcomed by miners but opposed by environmental groups who said Cimatu does not have a track record in environmental conservation.

Cimatu told Reuters on Tuesday it was possible to strike a balance between allowing mining and protecting natural resources, and he wanted time to assess the mine closures ordered by his predecessor.

"Here I am wading into a field far removed from soldiery. That is why you will please excuse me if I ask that I be given time to scan and study the terrain in an agency which impacts considerably on our very life as a people and the future of our beloved Philippines," Cimatu said in a speech at the leadership turnover ceremony at the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR).

Cimatu added he was surprised when President Duterte chose him to head DENR, but he knew the president way back during his stint as a brigade commander in Davao.

"I will try to do my best as President Duterte's point man in the daunting task of protecting the environment in all its forms, from the mines to the lakes and rivers to the forests to the plains to our waters to our sewers, to the very air we breathe, you name it, while promoting the wise and proper use of these God given resources for the public good," he said.

He also noted he will implement the mining laws.

"I intend to listen to all the voices out there and make full use of our powers and resources to ensure that these various concerns, some of which oftentimes clash, will be properly and judiciously addressed. For in the end, we at the DENR will only be as effective as our various constituents will help us to be," Cimatu said.

He dismissed as "allegations" the corruption issues raised by critics referring to his stint in the military.

Earlier, the Chamber of Mines of the Philippines said it welcomes Cimatu's appointment as the new environment chief with "cautious optimism."

"His sterling record in government service speaks well of Gen. Cimatu and we hope that his appointment finally answers our long-held call for a DENR secretary who has a balanced appreciation for environmental protection and natural resources management," the group said in a statement.

"The Chamber remains committed to working with President Duterte's administration in promoting responsible mining, and we look forward to working with Secretary Cimatu in enforcing our country's environmental and natural resource laws," it added.

Environmental group Greenpeace expressed concern over Cimatu's appointment.

"Without prejudice to Mr. Cimatu, we have to be clear on the strengths and expertise of an appointee as DENR secretary. We need somebody with a clear track record on the environment," said Vince Cinches, Greenpeace Philippines' political campaigner.

"The problem with having a DENR secretary who has no clear track record on environmental issues is that the person likely won't see the importance of a healthy ecosystem to a healthy economy," Cinches added.

For his part, Jose Bayan iBaylon, Nickel Asia Corp. vice president for corporate communications, said: "As I understand it, PRRD (President Rodrigo Roa Duterte) always wanted a general at the helm of DENR. Maybe to use an iron fist in dealing with all illegals."

Cimatu was chief of the Armed Forces of the Philippines from May to September 2002, and was earlier appointed as special envoy for Overseas Filipino Workers refugees and special envoy to the Middle East.

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