Marinduque Still Suffering From Mine Spill Fifteen Years After

By INA R. ALLECO SILVERIO

Fifteen years after the Boac river mining disaster in Marinduque, environmental advocates in the island continue to press for justice for the damaged environment and the devastating effects on the livelihood and welfare of the residents. They said they remain frustrated and angry as they marked the 15th anniversary of the disaster that happened on March 24, 1996 and killed the once pristine waters of the Boac river.

Environmental groups in Marinduque are now calling on President Benigno Aquino III to make Marinduque ‘mining-free.’

“After 15 years of the disaster, the people and our local government units have filed several civil and criminal cases in the various courts of the land but we have learned the hard lesson of knowing that our own judicial system and national government cannot defend us from foreign invaders of our natural resources. These cases have not even reached the trial stages after fifteen years,” said Marinduque Council for Environmental Concerns (MaCEC) Executive Director Myke Magalang.

Loan from the Asian Development Bank

It was in 1969 when Marcopper Mining Corporation began its copper mining operations in Marinduque, Philippines. After securing a loan from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) amounting to US$40 million, Placer Dome, Inc. managed and controlled Marcopper. Placer Dome, which owned 40 percent of Marcopper, secured and guaranteed the loans from the ADB.

Various reports state that for the next 30 years, the people of Marinduqueños suffered through a series of environmental mining-related disasters. According to reports, from 1975 to 1991, Calancan Bay became the dumpsite for millions of tons of mine tailings by Placer Dome’s operations. Marcoper’s Mogpog river dam burst in 1993, flooding the downstream villages in Mogpog. Two children were reported to have been killed.

In 1996, a 2.6-kilometer long drainage tunnel which was connected to the mine’s waste disposal pit, cracked. Some 4,400 people or 700 families were isolated by flash floods. A total of 1.6 million cubic meters of mine tailings also spilled into into Makalupnit and Boac rivers. In 1998, then president Fidel Ramos declared a state of calamity in the province of Marinduque.

An investigative report by James Esguerra, (Case Study Four: Marcopper Mining Corporation,” ADB and the Environment: A Monitoring Framework for the ADB’s Environment Policy) said that in March 1997, the ADB and Placer Dome made an agreement to transfer the bank’s interest to MR Holdings, Ltd. MR Holdings is a company created by Placer Dome based in the Cayman Islands. The ADB received around US$20 million, and after the outstanding loan was paid, the project documents that were with the ADB reportedly disappeared or became inaccessible. The ADB said it
was no longer involved in the project and the project is not covered by the 1994 Information Disclosure Policy.

Critics said the ADB washed its hands off the tragedy.

A Contaminated River, Ill Residents

In 1989, Placer Dome Corporate Vice President John Hick said Marcopper does not believe it has polluted Calancan Bay in a legal sense.” Ten years later, it told residents in a letter that Placer Dome “rejects allegations that it is also responsible for alleged damage to fishing in Calancan Bay.”

The Marcopper Mining disaster directly affected the municipalities of Sta. Cruz, Mogpog and Boac. Marinduqueños rely heavily on fishing and farming, but because of the mine spill, Calancan Bay, Boac and Mogpog rivers were contaminated. The rivers died, and the community and nearby areas became contaminated. People fell ill, and children’s blood tests revealed that they had high cyanide levels. Collected soil samples showed that the soil had unacceptable levels of lead, cadmium and elevated levels of copper and zinc. Lead values were present in the air samples, exceeding the standards of the US Environmental Protection Agency.

“Fifteen years after the Boac River Disaster, contaminated mine tailings still find their way into Tablas Strait which continuously threatens even the livelihood of the fisher folks in the nearby provinces of Romblon, Mindoro, Batangas and Quezon who are as poor as we are. We do not want any more mining operations in our province. This is the only way that our vulnerabilities and poverties will be reduced,” said Mamerto M. Lanete, also of the MaCEC and complainant to the Writ of Kalikasan (G.R. No. 195482), filed against the mining firms.

Writ of Kalikasan

The Writ of Kalikasan is a “remedy available to a natural or juridical person, entity authorized by law, people’s organization, non-governmental organization, or any public interest group accredited by or registered with any government agency, on behalf of persons whose constitutional right to a balanced and healthful ecology is violated, or threatened with violation by an unlawful act or omission of a public official or employee, or private individual or entity, involving environmental damage of such magnitude as to prejudice the life, health or property of inhabitants in two or more cities or provinces.”

It was issued by the Supreme Court in April 2010 and according to proponents, it gives flesh to the power of the citizens to assert their rights to a better ecology.

Eliza M. Hernandez, another complainant, called on local government officials of Marinduque to be firm and united in their resolve to defend the ecosystem. She also called on President Aquino “to spare Marinduque from further mining activities to give way for the clean-up of our damaged environments.”

The MaCEC said that up to now, mine waste contamination of the coastal areas around Calancan Bay in the municipality of Sta. Cruz threatens and poses health hazards to the men, women and children living in the area.
“Their coping mechanisms have been reduced while they are greatly vulnerable to hydro-meteorological hazards that are aggravated by the threats of climate change,” it said.

The group also said that the neglected and impassable roads of the mining company in the municipality of Sta. Cruz are continuously contributing to the hardships of the people who rely on the said roads in going out of their communities to market their produce and to secure their daily basic needs from the market, thus, reducing the economic and social activities of the communities of Libjo, Caganhao, Kinyaman, San Antonio, Kilo-kilo and Makulapnit in the municipality of Sta. Cruz, and the communities of Puting Buhangin and Mahinhin in the municipality of Boac.

In the meantime, the huge amount of outstanding real property taxes of the mining company which are payable to the Municipalities of Sta. Cruz, Boac, Mogpog and Torrijos and the province of Marinduque has reduced significantly the capacity of the local government units to finance programs, projects and activities for the delivery of basic services.

“These lessons teach us, Marinduqueños, to be firm in our resolve to defend our island-province as a “no-go-zone” for any other mining activities if only to ensure the livelihoods and welfare of our future generation. We call on President Aquino to hear and heed our call for a mining-free and disaster-free province,” Magalang said.


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