Mining Project Digs Up Locals’ Ire
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PUERTO PRINCESA, Philippines, Sep 8, 2010 (IPS/IFEJ) -
Depending on who one talks to, Mt Mantalingahan is either a
treasure trove of untapped minerals lying underneath the earth’s
crust, or a biodiversity hotspot that is home to some of the
world’s rarest and threatened animals.

It is both, which is why Mt Mantalingahan, some 150 kilometres south
of this capital city of the Philippines’ central Palawan province, is the
scene of conflict between communities and environmental activists
on one hand, and mining companies on the other.

Palawan accounts for bulk of the country’s reserves of nickel ore,
valued at 300 billion U.S. dollars, official data show. But cashing on
this is easier said than done, because it would involve compromising
large areas of old- growth forests and the ecological benefits derived
from them.

Geologist Jose Antonio Socrates calls Mt Mantalingahan “perhaps the country’s largest deposit of nickel ore”,
which explains why major mining companies have stepped up plans and others have filed for mining claims
before the regulatory agencies in the capital Manila.

But for Danny Balete, one of the country’s top mammal scientists, Mantalingahan is “the centre of the
Philippines’ mammalian endemism and biodiversity” and home of the ‘Tau’t Bato’ (stone people) tribe, whose
number is estimated to be down to less than 500 individuals.

Balete discovered a new species of mountain shrew in Mt Mantalingahan, and other scientists collected new
species of plants, including a stunning white orchid with golden lip petals.

Mantalingahan’s importance as the home to a number of short-range endemic species, including the soft-furred mountain rat, which had not been seen in decades, and critically endangered species like the Palawan peacock pheasant and the Palawan cockatoo, has also been noted by the Alliance for Zero Extinction, an
initiative of 52 multinational biodiversity organisations.

“There is so much still to learn about Mt Mantalingahan, so much to discover not just for science but more
importantly for society who stands to benefit from this wealth of biological resources,” Balete said, referring
to potential medicinal breakthroughs from bioprospecting.

Balete added that the 2007 survey his group did in Mantalingahan for Conservation International underlined
that it is an “important component of the country’s overall biodiversity”.

In June 2009, former President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo declared Mantalingahan a national park and
classified it as a ‘protected landscape’ covering 120,457 hectares.

Against this backdrop, the conflict between mining interests and environmentalists is heating up – and
involving local officials, laws and communities. Buoyed by the global demand for nickel and a government
policy to revive mining, several mining firms plan to set up operations around Mantalingahan. MacroAsia, the
flagship of one of the country’s most prominent business conglomerates, is applying for local permits to
operate a 25-year government lease it got in the town of Brooke’s Point that partly overlaps with the
protected area.

Two other companies – Ipilan Nickel Mining Corp and Lebach Mining Corp – are in earlier stages of project
development, trying to get all local endorsements needed to proceed.

Standing in their way are civil society groups that are challenging their every move – from securing
endorsements from communities and provincial regulatory bodies, to filing legal action to stop mining
projects.

The residents of Ipilan village who oppose mining, led by village captain Job Lagrada, have vowed to put up
a human barricade if the government allows the projects to proceed. They believe that mining will destroy
their farms and watersheds.

One group, the Palawan Youth Force, has embarked on a signature campaign on the social networking site
Facebook to convince the Philippines’ new president, Benigno Aquino III, to prevent new mining activity in
the province.
A lawyers’ organisation, the Environmental Legal Assistance Centre, has hauled to court most provincial officials for endorsing a mining project in the Narra municipality, in alleged violation of a special national law protecting Palawan’s remaining old-growth forests.

One contentious issue about Mantalingahan is whether mining should be allowed in "core zone" areas with old-growth forests, which are protected under the Strategic Environmental Plan (SEP) law for Palawan. An initial review by the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD), the provincial regulatory agency, showed that all except 91 hectares of the area leased to MacroAsia are “core and restricted zones” protected under the SEP zoning system.

But MacroAsia maintains that its legal right to utilise its leased area has precedence over local laws, including the proclamation of Mantalingahan as a protected area.

The former vice mayor of Brooke’s Point, Jean Feliciano, claims that the majority of municipal officials who back the MacroAsia project plan to change local laws and reclassify old-growth forest areas under the local zoning plan, in order to accommodate the mining project. "There is now an effort to revise the comprehensive land use plan," Feliciano said.

Feliciano blames MacroAsia for being behind the "harassment" of anti-mining groups in Brooke’s Point, citing the case of the chief village official of Iplan who is facing a slew of administrative cases related to his opposition to the project. The official, Job Lagrada, had stopped the mining firm from conducting surveys.

In an interview, MacroAsia’s vice president for operations, Ramon Santos, declined to comment on most of the criticism against the company, saying "we have formally responded to those issues raised by the PCSD".

He said MacroAsia is not directly involved in the move to change the land use plan in order to accommodate its nickel ore project. "It is the concern of the local government unit, which is mandated to prepare their own comprehensive land use plan," he said.

Santos added: "We have a good relationship with the community, with the local government. We have the all the endorsements – although, in this world you cannot please everybody."

But Feliciano questions the validity of the signatures MarcoAsia got to comply with the mandatory local requirements. "They only got the signatures of the people that favoured them. Those who were against the project, they did not bother to consult. That’s not what social acceptability is all about," Feliciano pointed out.

Lagrada, who has been suspended from his duties while the administrative complaint by Macroasia is pending, remains firm in his anti-mining stance. "They (mining companies) might have bought off most officials to endorse mining, and those people will benefit financially, while we suffer the environmental consequences. If this project goes ahead, we will put up a human barricade to oppose it," he said in Filipino.

* This story is part of a series of features on biodiversity by IPS, CGIAR/Bioversity International, IFEJ and UNEP/CBD, members of Communicators for Sustainable Development (http://www.complusalliance.org).

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