

Destroying the sensitive island of Rapu-Rapu¹

The town of Rapu-Rapu is a fourth-class island municipality in the province of Albay, situated north of Lagonoy Gulf, southwest of Pacific Ocean, and east of Albay Gulf. The island provides livelihood in terms of fishery, farming and native crafts. It is the site of the Rapu-rapu Polymetallic Project operated by Lafayette (Phils), Inc., which has already started with the construction of a pier, an access road and accommodation camp. The company expects to produce around 315,000 oz of gold, 3.7 million oz of silver, 57,000 tons of copper, and 83,000 tons of zinc. Total mineral resources in Rapu-rapu are estimated at US\$262 million.

Eleven rural barangays and the town of Rapu-Rapu depend on limited water supply produced by the watershed of the island. At present, some areas of the forest in this watershed are already denuded, thus endangering the availability of water and worsening the present state of the water supply. With mining, competition between the residents and the mining company for the limited water resource becomes even more serious.

Environmental scientist Dr. Emelina Regis of the Inecar (Ateneo de Naga's Institute for Environmental Conservation and Research) strongly



Limestone quarry

2003, the firm suffered from a 2-week strike by the employees' union.

8. Hazardous working conditions are not being addressed. Only a part-time doctor attends to the medical needs of its employees who are exposed to the dust particles and other physical dangers of operating the different machines and equipments. An injured worker, in fact, failed to immediately avail himself of Philhealth benefits because of the doctor's failure to issue a medical certification.

The DENR-MGB, through the Multipartite Monitoring Team, had been conducting inspections of the cement plant. But monitoring reports are hardly accessible to the public, even to some local officials vocal about the problems. The DENR claimed that the company has already gained ISO 14000 certification which means that Goodfound Cement conforms with the international environmental management standard³.

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- ¹ DENR Environment and Natural Resources Presentation, November 23, 2004. Forum on Bicol State of the Environment. Casablanca Hotel, Legazpi City. Sponsored by Coalition for Bicol Development (CBD).
- ² Interview with Hon. Lerma Camba, Member of the Sangguniang Bayan, Camalig, Albay, February 18, 2005.
- ³ Gilbert Gonzales, DENR presentation, November 23 - 25. Casablanca Hotel, Legazpi City.



Perpetual pollution due to AMD

opposes mining in Rapu-Rapu for three reasons: It pollutes rivers, streams and aquatic life in a phenomenon called acid mine drainage (AMD); contaminates the area with heavy metals; and it will destroy Rapu-Rapu's a fragile island ecosystem. Lafayette responds to these issues saying that it intends to responsibly carry out its operations according to the world's best mining practices that ensure environmental sustainability.

Inecar confirmed the occurrence of AMD in sulphide-bearing rocks at Pagcolbon, the mining site of Lafayette, and the upper slopes of Sta. Barbara, the abandoned mining site of Hixbar. Dr. Regis discovered it through the indicator species of weeds whose pollen grains were aborted.

Destruction of the island for the sake of a few mining jobs will bring down the productivity of the land for farming and coral reefs for fishing. Once the island is reduced by mining to rocks and rubble devoid of living organisms, typhoons and heavy rains will devastate the island and sweep off of its loosened materials. Heavy metals released will contaminate fisheries in Albay Gulf and Lagonoy Gulf. The coastal areas of the mainland already suffer from siltation with the denudation of its forest and mangrove areas. The small islands still contain coral reefs that can be regenerated. Protection of these islands must be taken seriously because it will be the country's last resort for the fishery sector.

Part of the coastal area of Sorsogon province faces Albay Gulf while a large part of the coastal area of Camarines Sur faces Lagonoy Gulf. Contamination of the fishery resources in these two water bodies will affect not only the residents of Rapu-Rapu, those of the rest of Albay, Sorsogon and Camarines Sur, but all those who will buy fish caught from these two water bodies.

Contamination of the soil, water, air, food crops, livestock and fisheries can cause diseases which require medicine. In most cases, such medicine is not only limited but expensive, thereby increasing the cost to human survival and aggravating the poverty level of the less fortunate. Furthermore, diseases make people unproductive and thus, human resource becomes a liability.

Lafayette retorts that mining would provide jobs to the community, and to government, the much-desired revenues to fuel economic growth. The construction phase currently employs over 800 workers, but only around 200 of them are local residents. Mining operations would only require around 450 workers. Preferential treatment will be given to people from the community; however, there

is no guarantee that this policy would be sustained with the unavoidable migration to the island.

The estimated revenue of P1.458 billion to be generated would seem staggering, especially for a fourth-class municipality. However, it will be divided among the municipal government (26.06 percent), provincial government (5.35 percent), and the national government (68.59 percent). The amount represents roughly 14 percent of Lafayette's total revenue from the project. It can considerably decrease since the government considers mining a pioneering industry and provides tax incentives and holidays under Executive Order (EO) 226 (Omnibus Investment Code). While the project or mine life is only seven years, the 1987 Omnibus Investment Code provides investors a 5-year tax holiday, renewable for another 5 years. Understandably, decreasing tax payments will be a strategy employed by Lafayette to increase income. The government might be left waiting for the rain in the middle of summer.

A Rapu-Rapu Island elder who witnessed the advent of mining in the municipality surmised that mining has not had any long-term economic benefit to them. Mining operations at the start led to an influx of people and a boom to the economy, as experienced in Barangay Sta. Barbara. Today, all that remain in Sta. Barbara are several households trying to eke out a living from fishing and farming. Poverty has remained, along with the ruins of the pier that once welcomed hopeful faces and the irreparable damage to the land and rivers.

The Rapu-rapu Polymetallic Project confirmed the use of the open-pit method of mining and the use of cyanide in processing the gold. An abandoned open pit at the Hixbar mining area has shown various contaminated and destroyed portions of the past mining activities. However, extraction in this area is not yet finished because this is still a part of the mineral exploration application by Lafayette Mining Company. Therefore, continued diggings will only enlarge this open pit.

Cyanide used in mining is lethal to living organisms. Cyanide residue in tailings pond has been reported to kill birds and other animals attracted to the water in the pond. Furthermore, there is a danger of accidental discharge of cyanide from the tailings pond, which can cause massive fish kills.

Lastly, remediation is very expensive so that mining companies tend to disappear after mining has ceased.

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- ¹ Emelina G. Regis. Position Paper Against Mining in Rapu-Rapu. Institute for Environmental Conservation and Research (INECAR), Ateneo de Naga University. 2000.