



CORDILLERA PEOPLES ALLIANCE

*For the Defense of the Ancestral Domain
and for Self Determination*

July 1, 2009

The Cordillera Peoples Alliance is issuing this story, following the recent environmental disaster in Mankayan, Benguet. July 26, 2009 marks the 10th year since the massive sinking, landslide and ground subsidence in Colalo Mankayan. Ten years after in the same province, the sinking and subsidence takes place in another barangay. More than ever, residents fear for their lives, knowing that no one is safe in Mankayan.

Lepanto: Shattering its Own Myth of Safe and Responsible Mining

Edna (*not her real name) is near tears. The sinking in Colalo, Mankayan in 1999 remains fresh and real in her memory—and so does the fear it caused her and her family. “Wherever I am—in my vegetable garden at work or being here in front of you today—I am never at peace knowing that anytime, another disaster will happen. I think of my children who are now in school. What if the ground will suddenly collapse and sink again, like it did last June 5?”

In a press conference and briefing before the media, residents of Mankayan conveyed how the massive and disastrous ground subsidence on June 5, 2009 in Brgy. Poblacion, Mankayan, had affected their daily lives—and how Lepanto Consolidated Mining Company’s (LCMC) underground bulk mining remains responsible for the environmental disasters in the said northern municipality of Benguet due to over 73 years of corporate mining. Ten years ago in Barangay Colalo, also in Mankayan, the management of LCMC simply dismissed the massive sinking and landslides as “an act of God.”

Ground subsidence and sinking in Mankayan was first observed by residents as early as 1972, in two sites: the Mankayan Central School and along the Magumbang Creek both in Barangay Poblacion. Other sites that were reported to have sunk included areas of the Mankayan National Highschool and a large portion of Aurora Street. Copper and gold deposits were mined under these areas from 1969 to 1995. As early as this time, Lepanto’s underground blasting along Upper Tram, Stopes 35GH and 30 H of Level 1100 and Level 1070, was suspected as one of the causes of subsidence.

LCMC started to operate in Mankayan in 1936. But as early as 1850, the colonial authorities in Manila sent a mining engineer to Mankayan to examine the Igorot’s copper mines therein. Seventy-one troops accompanied the engineer. In 1856, launch the operations of the *Sociedad Minero-Metalurgica Cantabro-Filipina de Mancayan* with 120 Chinese immigrant workers and a Mexican smelter. Bearing high grade ore, Mankayan, from the onset, was a mining haven.

Remembering Colalo

Residents observed prominent cracks above the LCMC’s quarry site for Tailings Dam 5A at Colalo Proper on July 21, 1999. The quarry site was where land was dug out of Colalo and Cabiten barangays for the dam crest of Tailings Dam 5A. The said tailings dam was constructed between the two barangays. The cracks were noticed at farms above the quarrying site, near the Colalo Elementary School and along the Mankayan-Cervantes National Road. Sensing danger, barangay officials requested LCMC to observe the cracks but the company ignored this request.



LCMC was allowed to build Tailings Dam 5A right at the middle of two villages, where people live. The tailings dam catches hazardous substances from the mine operations.

On July 25, people started to evacuate from their homes to safer grounds. School facilities were transported as well. The barangay council and the Parents-Teachers Association decided to suspend classes to ensure the children's safety. The following day, July 26, a large portion of Colalo Proper above the quarry site sunk and eroded, totally damaging the elementary school, four homes, a portion of the road, several farms and orchards and other improvements. The sinking affected at least 10 hectares of land. Local resident Pablo Gomez, 36 years old, married and with five children, was buried alive while transporting school facilities to higher ground. Residents immediately searched for Gomez for over a week, but Gomez' body was never found. On August 8, a symbolic "burial service" was conducted for Gomez.

On the same month, then Congressman Ronald Cosalan initiated an inquiry through the Congressional Committee on Environment. Here, barangay officials and residents attested that the sinking and ground subsidence was due mainly to the mining activities of LCMC, and the construction of Tailings Dam 5A, which locals claimed to have made the land softer, thus more prone to erosion and slides.

The sinking went down by about 550 meters and by some 400 meters by Tailings Dam 5A, devastating some 14 hectares of land.

NIGS Independent Investigation

The National Institute of Geological Studies at the University of the Philippines was tapped to conduct an independent investigation on the Colalo sinking. The Institute's findings stated that the sinking was due to man-made and natural causes, the natural causes being attributed to geological characteristics of the locality and the heavy rains. On the other hand, the Institute reported that mining activities have caused a rise in the water table elevation and the removal of basal support. The investigation corroborated the opinion of residents on the causes of the sinking. The Institute further stated in its findings that man-made causes, immediate of which is LCMC's mining activities, caused the sinking and erosion" *The removal of slope support is a natural consequence of underground mining which in turn can cause subsidence in any area.*" The report added that mining "exacerbated the negative conditions already existent in the area."

The NIGS investigation made several recommendations, including reopening of the abandoned or sealed tunnels of LCMC which lie below the Mankayan Central School, conduct of follow-up and detailed structural and geologic mapping of the subsidence area and monitoring of the subsidence rates, among others. The team of geologists requested copies of the underground maps from then Resident Manager Augusto Villaluna. No maps reached the team up to the time the report was written.

"Mankayan is Hollow"

Engr. Vergel Aniceto, spokesperson of the Benguet Mining Alert and Action Network (BMAAN), explained to local media how Mankayan had become hollow due to LCMC's long years of underground bulk mining. "Bulk mining simply means open pit operations inside the mountains, which the company had not backfilled, contrary to its claims. Abra River is evidence to this, as it is heavy with siltation. Where else would the runoff and siltation come from?" he said.

He added further that, as per findings of the NIGS 10 years ago on the locality's geological characteristics, MGB should already disallow further expansion and operations from Lepanto. "The rockbeds are slipping—they are not properly positioned. This should give MGB more reason to prohibit any more mining operations", he said, adding that LCMC should already divulge its mine plan so that Mankayan residents will see for themselves and that proper and immediate relocation be carried out.

Former LCMC mineworker Vicente Dilem supported Aniceto's explanation. "I have seen and worked in the underground operations, that is why I do not at all believe MGB's claim that mining had nothing to do with the subsidence", he said. Dilem explained how high technology loaders were used in Levels 1100 and 1050 to

mine the high-grade copper in the company's Victoria I project. When the world market for copper plunged, LCMC abandoned the un-backfilled underground operations.

"The un-backfilled stopes are exactly where the Mankayan National High School lies", he said.

To date, LCMC has remained mum about the June 5 sinking in Poblacion. Ironically, MGB has been on the defense, saying that mining is not to blame as it is not the sole cause of the sinking. Parallel to LCMC's denial of any accountability to the disasters, MGB has maintained a record of consistently siding with the company and covering up for the former's liabilities.

Mining and Militarization

Colalo Punong Barangay Ambino Padawi challenged the MGB to disclose the truth to the people of Mankayan, adding that one purpose of the deployment of the 50th Infantry Battalion in their hometown is to sow fear and terror to the people's opposition. "The military must now be pulled out of Mankayan because it is not serving us any good," he said.

The Cordillera Human Rights Alliance (CHRA) and the CPA have dialogued twice with the 50th IB in Bulalacao, together with the local elders, and LGUs, due to complaints made by local residents on human rights violations and the harassment and intimidation of MAQUITACDG organizers in the area.

Even the regional office of government's Commission on Human Rights present in one of the dialogues stated that the 50th IB's mere presence in the area is militarization, and that it must immediately vacate the Barangay Day Care Center where its troops were staying.

Residents reported that soldiers have been conducting surveys with questionnaires asking if they belong to any organization like the CPA, and which partylists have they voted for in the past elections. During these "surveys", troops were in full battle gear causing fear among the people. In several incidents, the 50th IBPA aggressively took videos and photos of their suspected members and supporters of the CPA. The 50th IBPA did not deny their taking of videos and photos of the residents. A certain Sgt. Macasiray even confidently admitted that the taking of video or photos of the residents is legal under the Human Security Act and such shall be used for the filing of future charges under the said law.

In the month of May, the 50th IB conducted film showings in different areas, which maliciously labels, tags and demonizes progressive, legitimate and legal organizations and party lists, the CPA included, and its allied organizations as sectoral fronts of the CPP-NPA-NDFP. In one brazen attack, elements of the 50th IBPA posted in Mankayan Poblacion "IBAGSAK ANG KILUSANG MAYO UNO, K-ILUSANG M-AGTATANGGAL SA U-NG TRABAHO" during the May 1 celebration of the International Labor Day.

Macasiray rationalized that their presence is part of their "Community Outreach Program (COP)", which aims to bring the AFP near the hearts of the people by providing alleged socio-economic projects. The 50th IB is headed by Lt. Rashid Avila. It is the same military unit that terrorized in Pananuman, Tubo, Abra province from March to April 2008. The intense military activities—bombing, mortar shelling—resulted in economic dislocation of the Maeng indigenous community, desecration of the dap-ay, post-traumatic stress disorder, and the summary execution of a senior citizen, Mariano Galisen.

CPA iterates the 50th IB's immediate pullout from Mankayan—because wherever it is deployed, it will replicate and worsen what it did in Tubo, Abra. It will not think twice of wreaking havoc, hurting and killing people.

State of Calamity, Danger Zone

The sinking in Poblacion on June 5 had initially directly affected 10 households. Eight families were immediately evacuated. At least 10 meters had sunk near the premises of St. Joseph Parish and the main grounds of the Mankayan National Highschool. With the continuing sinking and landslides, the provincial government had declared the municipality in a state of calamity.

In 2000, other sinking areas included Tabak, Bulalacao and Sapid, while fissures yearly occur at the Mankayan-Cervantes Road. In April 2009, a portion of the slaughter house in Brgy. Poblacion sunk after fissures gradually formed. LCMC was even in hot waters recently because of the asbestos dumping from its head office in Makati in Brgy. Sapid, as early as 2007. Mankayan Mayor Manalo Galuten had the asbestos waste tested for chemicals, and was found to contain the cancer-causing chemical amosite, which causes the cancer mesothelioma. Mesothelioma affects the lungs, chest, abdomen and heart. Galuten lamented that after LCMC had dug their mountains for gold, the company backfilled it with hazardous substances.



LCMC's brazen arrogance is highly condemnable. Are the people of Sapid any less different such that LCMC can just turn their village into a dump site?

Enough of the Disasters, Save Mankayan

Lepanto and the MGB have attributed the environmental calamities to naturally occurring events such as movements of fault lines and even heaven's will, but the people of Mankayan know for a fact that it is the years of underground bulk mining that has caused the land subsidence and sinking, and these are only hastened by natural phenomena such as strong rains and typhoons. LCMC and MGB posture as if they have a monopoly of the scientific explanations. As a matter of fact, MGB and LCMC are running out of arguments that they have resorted to claiming that the disasters are an "act of God." The more that Lepanto and MGB defend themselves, the more they expose their desperation to cover up their accountability to the disasters.

A culture of impunity pervades in relation to the human rights violations and environmental disasters LCMC is responsible of, that as if it is immune from penalty. MGB has served as Lepanto's mouthpiece every time a disaster happens—an act that shows its effort to cover up its liabilities for the Mankayan environmental disasters. It is actually high time for MGB to be evaluated of its duties and functions, especially since it has allowed the environmental disasters to happen in Mankayan, even if it already knows the geological nature of the locality. Mankayan is not an isolated case. Only last year, a horrendous landslide happened in Itogon, Benguet due to the prolonged open pit and underground mining operations of Benguet corporation. In other regions, environmental disasters have also taken place as a result: Rapu-rapu where Lafayette operated in 2005, and in Marinduque where Marcopper created the country's latest mining disaster, in 1996.

CPA appeals for urgent action to the local governments of Mankayan and Benguet, other sectors and government line agencies to ensure that further catastrophe will not befall Mankayan. The security of the people of Mankayan is an urgent concern. Immediate humanitarian aid and response is needed, and we appeal to all individuals, organizations and sectors to help save Mankayan. While we appeal to the public for support to the people of Mankayan, we hold LCMC responsible for all the environmental disasters, the social cost of its operations, and the historic injustice to the ancestral land rights of Cordillera indigenous peoples due to its plunder and exploitation.

Lepanto shattered its own myth of safe and responsible mining. It is a classic case that proves the fallacy of an extractive industry like mining to socially responsible. Now, with LCMC and MGB's accountabilities to the people of Mankayan, the only justice that can be done is to have the mining operations be put to a permanent stop, and let the people of Mankayan have prior use and management of their ancestral land and resources. # ***Cordillera Peoples Alliance Public Information Commission***

Sources:

RP's Biggest Gold Miner Accused of Dumping Hazardous Waste. GMA News.TV March 14, 2009

University of the Philippines Report National Institute of Geological Sciences: Report on the Mankayan Sinking. 1999.

Cordillera Peoples Alliance Fact Sheet: Colalo Sinking August 1999.