

Strengthening Solidarity and Intensifying Struggle for Land, Life and Rights amidst the Capitalist Crisis

Keynote Speech of Gabriela Women's Party Rep. Luzviminda C. Ilagan

25th Cordillera Day

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Gambang, Bakun, Benguet

Naimbag nga bigat!

Gabriela Women's Party salutes the men and women of Cordillera whose unwavering unity and solidarity over the years defended their collective rights over ancestral lands and resources against the total plunder by foreign capitalists in connivance with the local ruling elite. It is an honor to celebrate with you today the 25th Cordillera Day.

Aside from recalling and honoring the heroism of Ama Macliing Dulag – the Butbut tribal chieftain who risked his life in the process of protecting the Cordillera from the Marcos regime's intrusion and exploitation – we are here to strengthen our solidarity and intensify our struggle for land, life and rights in the face of new and greater threats against us now that the capitalist nations face an unprecedented economic and financial crisis.

Since the period of Spanish colonization, the Cordillera has been the subject of aggressions because of the vast gold reserves that lie beneath its mountains. While the Spaniards plan failed due to the resistance of the people, the Americans succeeded in setting up the first large-scale mine in Benguet by using the deceptive concept of "national development".

Instead of the promised progress, large-scale mining operations only destroyed the environment, homes, culture and tradition, and way of life of indigenous peoples. They left bodies of water heavily polluted, mountains stripped off of their natural resources, and tens of thousands of hectares of agricultural land ruined.

Despite having known that the economic, social and environmental costs of large-scale mining far outweigh its benefits, the Ramos administration succumbed to capitalist machineries like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to pass the Philippine Mining Act of 1995. This anti-people policy, sponsored by then Senator Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, opened around 15 million hectares of the country's lands up for mindless exploration and utilization by foreign corporations. More than half of these lands are in indigenous territory, with six of the priority mining projects located in the Cordillera region.

The indigenous peoples have always been the primary victims of development aggressions and the peoples of Benguet are not an exemption: the entry of large-scale mining operations in Cordillera heightened the discrimination and marginalization of the Igorots.

Aside from outright land grabbing, foreign mining companies and their accomplices in the Arroyo government often use deception, bribery and other illegal acts to displace indigenous peoples and small farmers from their lands. They promise roads, livelihood, health and other social services and development projects to gain

the affected communities' consent. In some instances, companies offer tribal elders and leaders large sums of money and/or relatively high-paying jobs in exchange for their approval of the mining operations.

Any form of resistance from the indigenous peoples is immediately quashed through the deployment of military and paramilitary forces. Men, women and children are tortured, intimidated, harassed, raped and murdered. From 2001 to 2007, the Indigenous Peoples Human Rights Watch has recorded 130 cases of extrajudicial killings that victimized IPs under the Arroyo government's Oplan Bantay Laya counter-insurgency program which targets militant organization leaders and members.

James Balao – founding member of the Cordillera Peoples Alliance and President of the Oclupan Clan – is one of the latest victims of the second phase of OBL. He was abducted by armed military forces in La Trinidad, Benguet on September 17, 2008.

As if OBL I and OBL II have not done enough damage, the fascist Arroyo regime introduced the Investment Defense Force to further militarize mining areas.

Marginalized, discriminated and exploited, the indigenous peoples cannot even get any relief from laws such as the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997. Created to “recognize, respect and protect the rights of the indigenous cultural communities to preserve and develop their cultures, traditions, and institutions,” IPRA is often circumvented to suit the interests of foreign capitalists.

Likewise, the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples or NCIP which was mandated by the IPRA to protect and promote the interests and wellbeing of the indigenous peoples, is used as an instrument to attain the goals of large-scale miners.

According to the Ramos administration, the Philippine Mining Act of 1995 will create employment opportunities, promote industrialization and enhance national growth.

Contrary to these claims, the liberalization of the mining industry has not brought about economic development either on the national or on the local level.

Of the thirteen years of implementation, large-scale mining only intensified poverty and economic degradation in many communities.

Benguet, for example, despite being among the provinces that produce the highest amount of gold and other minerals in the country, is still among the 20 poorest provinces together with other provinces in the Cordillera region. This is because the bulk of the billion dollar profits of foreign mining companies is immediately repatriated to their countries of origin instead of being paid directly to the province.

The Philippine Mining Act, in short gave foreign transnational corporations full access and control of the country's mineral wealth, at the expense of the people's rights and welfare. For these reasons, our progressive party-lists, Gabriela, Bayan Muna and Anakpawis sponsored a bill in the House of Representatives seeking to repeal this law.

While the US-Arroyo puppets in the Lower House have been attempting to “kill” this bill, they are at the same time, exhausting all efforts to sell-out our national patrimony and sovereignty by amending the economic provisions of the Constitution.

We are at a critical time. The world capitalist system’s promise of prosperity and progress in the name “globalization” has turn the tide against them and is submerging their advanced economies into a deep crisis. In an attempt to escape this self-created tragedy, they are, more than ever, abusing so-called third world countries such as the Philippines.

The indigenous peoples of Cordillera must reassert their rights over ancestral domain. The Cordillera is for the benefit of the peoples of the mountain, who for time immemorial have lived in and tilled these lands. Its wealth of resources should be used for their development and not for the aggrandizement of foreign transnational corporations.

You have done it in the past. The history of the Cordillera can attest to the importance of unity and perseverance in the struggle to defend your peoples’ right to self-determination. You have even inspired indigenous communities all over the country to resist large-scale mining operations and other so-called development projects in their territories.

So in the celebration of the 25th Cordillera Day, I iterate the call which should be responded to by all of the nationalistic and freedom-loving citizens of our country: let us strengthen our solidarity and intensify our struggle for land, life and rights!

Mabuhay ang mga taga-Benguet!

Mabuhay ang mga taga-Cordillera!

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