



The Real Cost of Mining: Water and Human Rights in the Philippines

IN 2004, A DELEGATION OF KAIROS AND MINING WATCH staff accompanied Filipino partners to the Canadian Embassy in Manila. The partners were in the midst of a long struggle to stop the Canadian-owned TVI-Pacific mine in the remote Canatuan area of Mindanao.

Our partners are Indigenous people, Muslim fishers, Christian farmers and small business owners who were living in a conflict zone even before the mine was set up. Despite differences and diversity, they did what many other communities in the Philippines are doing: they united in a non-violent call to stop the mine, and were prepared to take many risks to reach this goal.

Before the lengthy and sometimes angry meeting began, they said to the Canadians present, “All we really want is for the Canadian government to enforce Canadian environmental standards on its companies working overseas, just as they enforce them in Canada.” Something in our faces must have taken them aback, because they paused and said, “Your government does enforce standards for Canadian companies in Canada, right?”

We thought of the abandoned, contaminated military sites scattered across Inuit land in the North, of the Sydney tar ponds, of abandoned and unmonitored mine sites across the West, of the tar sands in Alberta, expanding despite the lack of completion of legally required environmental reviews. “Well,” we said, “our government doesn’t always enforce environmental standards on our companies at home.” There was a painful pause and the partners said, “Then we should visit you next, and we will help you hold your government to account.”

Filipinos speak of the land and waters of their country as their national heritage, to be treasured for current and future generations rather than sold off to the foreign bidders. Yet the Mining Act of 1995 (reinstated in 2004 after a constitutional challenge) permits foreign companies to own 100 percent of any mining operation. Generous tax

breaks and lax regulation are permitted, and in return the government is left with the piles of tailings, chemical contamination, and great pits that are left by large-scale mines.

The Philippines was closed to foreign-run mining after 1996, following an ecological disaster at the Marcopper mine owned by Canadian mining giant Placer Dome. For 16

years, the mine had dumped mine tailings in Calancan Bay, causing enormous damage to the fish-rich waters and sparking outbreaks of disease related to metal contamination in the surrounding communities. Then in



At the top of Mount Canatuan. NCCP

1996 the mountaintop tailings dam gave way, and tonnes of toxic tailings and water again slid down into the bay. Faced with great public anger throughout the country, the government closed the country to foreign mining until 2004.

Concerns about water contamination due to potential mining disasters are well founded. Throughout the world, two-thirds of the hundreds of serious mining accidents in the past 40 years have involved dam failures, and have usually resulted in massive contamination of the surrounding watershed.

Contaminated water and open pits are the most visible face of mining, but there’s a human cost too. In most cases, communities that will be affected by a mine don’t want it, despite widespread poverty and a desperate need for work. Indigenous communities in particular have protested the destruction of their lands and sacred sites. Faced with such opposition — some armed, but the majority non-violent — mining operations frequently call in security forces. Rodolfo Stavenhagen, the UN special rapporteur for indigenous people, visited the Philippines



Old tailings pond, TVI mine site.

By Julie Graham and Connie Sorio

and reported his grave concern with human rights abuses, including murders of community representatives, used to counter indigenous resistance to mining.

Canada's role

Canada is not a passive bystander in this debate: the Canadian Embassy in the Philippines has lobbied for the resumption of mining and for a prominent place for Canadian companies in the industry.

In May 2006, Canadian Ambassador Peter Sutherland was quoted in a TVI-Pacific press release as saying that "mining issues in the Philippines and in Canada are almost the same," including those that concern environmental safety and host communities. He added, "And because our companies are involved not just in Canada but also around the world, being a good corporate citizen is absolutely essential."

What the ambassador didn't say is that corporate responsibility is not subject to Canadian law, but is voluntary. A Canadian company can decide to follow best practices or not. If it doesn't, or if the local people don't want the mine, there's no way to stop it or to hold its owners legally accountable in Canada.

So, when our Filipino partners come here to help us, we will welcome them. And we are ready to walk with them because, just like water, both environmental destruction and the support of one's friends knows no borders.



Chief Jose Anoy points out his traditional hunting grounds. KAIROS

WHAT WE CAN DO

SIGN the KAIROS "Counting On Water" action for legislation requiring Canadian corporations to protect water and human rights. See www.kairoscanada.org or call toll free: 1-877-403-8933, extension 241.

RESPOND to urgent actions in support of human rights defenders in the Philippines. The Philippines is in the midst of a long series of killings and disappearances of faith and community leaders. Check the "urgent action" section on the KAIROS website to see if immediate support is required.

CONNECT to our members' work on binding legislation including Development and Peace at www.devp.org, and The United Church of Canada at www.united-church.ca

Recommended resources

(available on the KAIROS 2006-07 CD or on the sites listed):

Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines' statement on mining: www.cbcponline.net/statements/statementonmining.html

Mining Watch Canada's Philippines page: www.miningwatch.ca/index.php?/Philippines

Breaking Promises, Making Profits — Mining in the Philippines. Comprehensive report published by Christian Aid and Philippines Indigenous Peoples Links, December 2004: www.piplinks.org/development_issues/philippines_report.pdf

Probe International: Placer Dome page: www.probeinternational.org/probeint/Mining/placerdome