

In a State of Chronic Crisis: The Philippine Environmental Situation

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Without a doubt, the Philippines possesses vast natural resources enough to propel and support the country in a bid towards genuine national industrialization, self-sufficiency, sovereignty, and prosperity and away from hunger, debt, and poverty. However, the historical exploitation of its natural wealth by a few elite interests has continued unabated up to the present, leaving less land, water, floral and faunal species, and air for the benefit of the majority.

The criminal neglect of major Philippine ecosystems as well as the perpetration of policies supporting the plunder and destruction of our national patrimony continues at an ever increasing scale. Sadly, this is what the state of the Philippine environment for the current year illustrates: continued degradation and depletion of resources, alongside threats to people's rights to food, land, water and air and their right to defend the environment.

Threatened forests, biodiversity

The growing trend of resource depletion and degradation is especially manifest in the country's forests, which must comprise more than half of the Philippine archipelago for the interrelationships of ecosystems to be sustainable. However, the country's forest cover has dropped from 270,000 square km at the end of Spanish colonization in 1898 to only 8,000 square kilometers in 2006.

Sadly, this state has worsened under the Arroyo administration, which has yet to implement a genuine and comprehensive reforestation program. Instead, it has one by one lifted log bans and farmed out commercial logging permits: TLAs and 23 Integrated Forest Management Agreement (IFMA) contracts from January 2001 to 2004. These IFMAs cover a total area of 191,250.60 hectares. An IFMA contract allows its holder, which includes private industrial tree plantations, not just the right to timber, but to all other forest products within the concession area. Some 201 IFMAs were already issued as of 2003, covering around 714,000 hectares.

An example of this would be the Arroyo administration's accommodation of San Jose Timber Corp. operating in Samar Island. Decades back, the island was a "pie" that former President Ferdinand Marcos carved into logging concessions for his cronies and friends. The largest of these concessions (95,770 hectares, covering parts of a forest reserve and a nature park) was granted to then Defense Secretary Juan Ponce Enrile – now a Senator and a perceived ally of Arroyo – who owned the firm. In 1989, almost 100 people died due to massive flooding in Samar, which led the government to impose a moratorium on logging. Last August 2005, however, former DENR Secretary Mike Defensor signed an order allowing San Jose Timber Corp. to resume operations and even extended its logging permit by 16 years.

As a result of this policy towards heightened resource extraction, different flora and fauna are now being displaced from the forests which serve as their habitat. The Philippines has the highest number of endemic species on a per area basis, yet also the highest number of endemic endangered species. In 2001, 49 of the nation's mammal species, 86 bird species, and 320 plant species were threatened with extinction. These endangered species include the monkey-eating eagle, Philippine tarsier, tamarau, four species of turtle

(green sea, hawksbill, olive ridley, and leatherback), Philippines crocodile, sinarapan, and two species of butterfly. The Cebu warty pig, Panay flying fox, and Chapman's fruit bat have become extinct.

Shrinking agricultural lands

As crucial as the state of the Philippine forests is the state of its agricultural lands, on which more than 70% of the population directly and indirectly depends for food and livelihood. Trends in the state of agriculture, however, show landlessness among the tillers, backward agricultural technology, diminishing agricultural lands due to land conversion projects, pollution and degradation *please see sidebar*. This state is aggravated by globalization policies which push farmers to poverty and misery by allowing the dumping of agricultural surplus in the local market and favoring big foreign monopoly ownership and control of resources.

Presently, 14.2 million hectares or 47% percent of country's total land area is classified as alienable and disposable. As of 2003, 10.3 million hectares or 34% of total land area are classified as agricultural lands – encompassing temporary crops, permanent crops, livestock and poultry production. More than half is allocated to rice and corn production.

Yet, domestic agricultural food production continues to lag behind the demand. The country, from being a rice exporter, is increasingly becoming a rice importer. This year, the Arroyo administration is set to import an unprecedented 2.4 million metric tons of rice from Vietnam, Thailand, and Pakistan. Domestic rice smuggling and hoarding by local cartels exacerbates the looming problem of diminishing lands for food. From six million hectares, now only around four million hectares of lands are used for rice production due to a variety of factors.

Agrofuels, for instance, pose a looming threat to food security. The implementation of the Biofuels Act on May 6, 2007 requires the mandatory blending of coco bio-diesel with petroleum diesel initially at one percent in early May 2007 and increasing to two percent within two years. It also calls for 5% Ethanol with gasoline within the first 4 years. Particular to China and ethanol biofuel, there are three ethanol fuel plants will be set up by China in the Philippines, involving development of thousands of hectares of land for sugar cane, the main ingredient in ethanol production. Two are in Negros by BSBM BiofuelsCorp. and Southern Negros Development Corp: one for 120,000 liters a day in Murcia town in Negros Occidental province.

Biofuels have limitations as a source of 'clean' energy: expected carbon savings are low or even negative because it is highly energy intensive to grow crops and process of them into fuel. Converting farmland for rice or food to biofuel cultivation or destroying forests to make way for fuel crops will not only reduce the land available for growing food but could possibly worsen the the state of landlessness throughout the country. Even for high-yield crops, large tracts of land are necessary. According to one estimate, if all the country's coconut supply is to be turned into biodiesel, the country can only sustain up to a 20% blend of biodiesel.

Plunder of mineral wealth

A similar pattern of resource depletion is apparent in the country's mining industries. And while government data shows that nine million hectares or 30% out of the Philippine's total land area of 30 million hectares contain significant mineral deposits of 13 metallic minerals and 29 non-metallic minerals, the country's participation has been limited to extracting and exporting raw mineral ores while paying the steep environmental costs of such wanton

destruction.

Since 1992, the Philippine government has embarked on a “revitalization” and liberalization of the industry, opening up as much as 30 percent of the country's land area to mining through the passage of Mining Act of 1995 (Republic Act 7942), under which the Philippine government can grant a contractor the exclusive right to conduct exploration, develop and operate a mine in the contract area for 25 years, renewable for another 25 years.

As of 2007, the administration approved a total of 359 mineral agreements covering 514,949 hectares of land that are mostly located in forests and mountains, creating conditions for more deforestation and soil erosion. At least 1,760 applications are targeted to be approved by 2009. This fast-tracking of mining permits issued by the government to private firms starkly contrasts with the lax enforcement of laws concerning mining and its impacts on community welfare.

In addition, mining continues to be pursued in watershed and protected areas, and even conflict zones. To date, mining TNCs have already encroached into 35 national conservation priority areas, 32 national integrated protected areas and 17 important biodiversity areas. In the 24 Priority Mining Projects outlined by the Arroyo administration, 10 are directly or majority owned by foreign mining TNCs, while the rest are funded or related to foreign firms and banks. These 24 Priority Mining Projects encompass a total of 176,005 hectares nationwide, primarily in the Cordillera Region, Southern Mindanao, and Caraga region.

Another trend is the increasing presence of foreign mining giants in the Philippines: Xstrata Queensland Limited, a UK-Swiss company which is the fifth largest TNC worldwide owns 62.5% of the Tampakan Copper Project. Meanwhile, BHP Billiton, the world's largest mining TNC has interests in two Mindanao-based projects, including the Hallmark Nickel Project in Pujada Peninsula, Davao Oriental (11,799 hectares). Anglo American, the second largest TNC, has three projects in Cordillera and Mindanao.

The effects of such wanton incursion of mining are already evident: adverse environmental consequences, impacts on community health, displacement of indigenous peoples, upland settlers, as well as all who are dependent on the ecosystems to be mined, violations of human and civil rights and militarization, and dubious economic gains.

Depleted freshwater resources

Compared to other Asian countries, the Philippines has rich freshwater resources which have the potential to provide cheap and convenient sources of domestic and industrial water needs, water reservoirs, waste disposal systems, and transportation and navigational pathways.

Ironically, freshwater for the population to use is scarce: two out of five Filipinos (34%) do not get water from formal sources for domestic consumption while only 45% of irrigable farms are served by state and private irrigation systems. The DENR pegs the Philippines as having the second lowest annual per capita availability of freshwater in Asia, while the ADB pegs it as the seventh lowest in Asia.

Pollution of freshwater bodies is widespread and chronic. None of the water in 158 major rivers are totally safe for drinking; while sixteen are biologically dead. 51% of all waters classified by the EMB are polluted and do not meet DENR effluent standards while 60% of

groundwater sources are depleted and contaminated with coliform bacteria.

This pollution is due to decades of continuous waste dumping in inland water systems, including domestic, industrial, and agribusiness wastes, as well as the impacts of large-scale extractive activities such as logging, mining, and dam construction. As of 2005, nationwide, 34 bodies of water (28 rivers, 3 bays, 1 strait, 1 pass, 1 lake) are in various stages of pollution, degradation, and siltation caused by mine tailings and wastes.

Last year, the Marilao River in Bulacan – which is among the sources of drinking and agricultural water supplies for 250,000 people – was given the dubious distinction of being among the world's 30 dirtiest rivers and worst polluted places, as named by US-based Blacksmith Institute. River pollution was due to years of indiscriminate and continuous waste dumping by tanneries, gold and precious metals refineries, the largest lead smelter in the Philippines, and numerous municipal dumpsites.

Similarly, Laguna de Bay, one of Southeast Asia's largest freshwater lakes, could become biologically dead in a few years if rampant pollution due to domestic and industrial waste is not stopped. The lake produces about a third of Metro Manila's supply of milkfish and other edible fish, helps generate electricity and serves as a key transport route. However, the Arroyo administration has engaged in the privatization of freshwater sources as a response to the problem of water quality degradation and depletion. The Clean Water Act, passed in March 2004, gives more right to industries to pollute under the 'polluters pay' principle and through discharge permits. The Mining Act of 1995 also gives water rights to mining firms.

Threatened Marine and Coastal Resources

The Philippines has among the richest coastal and marine resources worldwide, yet these are in a state of rapid depletion and degradation.

Overfishing and resource depletion by large trawlers, purseiners, and other foreign fishing vessels poaching within the Philippine's exclusive economic zone have contributed to the depletion of the country's fish stocks by as much as 90% in the past 50 years. 32 fish species are in a critical state, while 29 are threatened with extinction. Overfishing threatens 98% of Philippine reefs.

The open access policy of the Philippine government has ushered in overfishing by foreign firms. Policies and treaties with foreign governments, such as the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation with the Japanese government in 1973, have allowed the commercial exploitation of major fishing grounds by the Japanese, and later on, US, Australian, and Canadian firms.

Degradation of fishing areas is also rampant. The propagation of commercial aquaculture is resulting in general declines in productivity of small-scale aquaculture farms and degradation of agricultural lands and mangrove areas converted into fishponds due to contamination from chemicals and feeds. Marine pollution resulting from mine tailings spills, logging, and the like also results in fish kills.

Monopoly control by local comprador landlords and foreign corporations is also prevalent with the Republic Act 8550 or the Fisheries Code allowing fish importation, while the RA 8435 or the Agricultural and Fisheries Modernization Act (AFMA) encourages fish production for export.

There is also the displacement of fisherfolks due to privatization of municipal fishing areas

and their conversion into private fish cages, ship docks, and eco-tourism sites, underwater oil exploration by foreign firms, and military exercises under the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA).

Urbanization and Air pollution

Urban environmental problems have intensified in the past 20 years. Increasing migration from rural to urban areas due to rural poverty, landlessness, and militarization has resulted in the proliferation of slum areas. Compounded by the dearth of basic social services and the pursuit of infrastructure projects aimed at facilitating private corporate profit and government corruption, this situation yields a host of environmental problems.

Data for air and water pollution outlined in the Philippine Environment Monitor (PEM), a joint report of the World Bank and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) in June 2007, indicate that air pollution, water pollution, sanitation, and hygiene practices account for an estimated 22 percent of reported disease cases and nearly 6.1 percent of reported deaths and costing PHP14.3 billion (US \$287 million) per year in lost income and medical expenditures.

- *Air Pollution* - An estimated 4,968 premature deaths each year in Metropolitan Manila due to respiratory and cardiovascular diseases from exposure to poor air quality, account for “12 percent of all deaths in the metropolis, the highest in any urban area in the country”¹. Poor air quality from outdoor air pollution in urban areas and indoor air pollution is also affecting health, accounting for an estimated five percent of all reported disease cases and four percent of all reported deaths in the country. Air pollution primarily causes respiratory diseases including acute and chronic bronchitis, pneumonia, and cardiovascular diseases. The impact on the economy from health expenditures and lost income is estimated to be P7.6 billion per year. A 2002 EMB survey discovered that ¾ of all firms in Metro Manila are polluting its air, while motor vehicles contributed the most number of pollutants.
- *Waste Management* - While household garbage collection is improving, 90 percent of sewage is not treated and disposed of in an environmentally sound manner, ending up in rivers, esteros, and drainage canals. Less than 10 percent of the country’s total population is connected to sewers and others rarely maintain adequate on-site sanitation. Deaths, tragedies, and diseases (such as the Payatas dumpsite tragedy) continue to be a constant threat.

Threats to environmental defenders

In the face of such threats, communities and individuals are actively opposing the presence of entities that promote the devastation of our ecosystems and the plunder of our national patrimony. Among the human, civil, and political rights violations committed against environmental defenders are militarization, human rights violations and legal harassment.

Presence of military detachments and police checkpoints observed in mining-affected areas, including Lafayette in Rapu-Rapu island, Albay, Filminera in Masbate island, Marcopper in Marinduque island, TVI in Zamboanga del Norte, Xstrata in South Cotabato, NMRDC in Mt. Diwalwal, Rio Tuba in Palawan, Crew Minerals in Mindoro Oriental, Climax Arimco/Oxiana in Nueva Vizcaya, Abra, Batangas, Zambales, Surigao del Norte, and Surigao del Sur. This trend of militarization seriously undermines the freedom of the

¹ Burgonio, TJ. “Air pollution kills nearly 5,000 Metro residents yearly”, [www.inquirer.net](http://services.inquirer.net/express/07/09/04/html_output/xmlhtml/20070904-86654-xml.html), 04 September 2007. <http://services.inquirer.net/express/07/09/04/html_output/xmlhtml/20070904-86654-xml.html>

people to protect their rights to natural resources and a healthful environment.

Furthermore, of the 886 victims of extrajudicial killings documented by human rights organization KARAPATAN from January 2001 to July 2007, Kalikasan People's Network for the Environment (KPNE) identified 17 victims as being active or leading the campaign against mining projects in their communities.

Persecution of environmental activists have also come in the form of SLAPPs (Strategic Legal Action against Public Participation), which are lawsuits ranging from libel to conspiracy used by powerful corporate entities against non-governmental individuals or groups defending issues of marginalized sectors, such as human, labor, peasant or consumer rights, environmental protection, national patrimony and the like.

In the course of monitoring community and civil society's opposition to various mining projects, environmental advocates such as KPNE are noting the rise of SLAPPs against environmental defenders by mining and logging firms. CEC-Phils Executive Director Frances Quimpo, for one, was charged with libel by Lafayette Philippines Inc., after exposing the effects of irresponsible mining in Rapu-Rapu Island in Albay.

Eight years of environmental degradation

As shown in the discussion, the state of the Philippine environment is a state of chronic crisis, reflecting the social and economic inequalities besetting the nation. The problems ailing the different ecosystems throughout the Philippines are ultimately intertwined with the problems behind the chronic degree of poverty and hunger, unemployment, landlessness, and social unrest.

And it is most reproachable that many practices and government policies are in conflict with the welfare of the people and the environment. Virtually, every sector of the environment and society stands in ruin with the policies to liberalize, deregulate, and privatize the country's natural resources and industries for the interests of foreign investors and their collaborators from the local elite.

Due to a combination of flawed policies, rampant corruption, chronic neglect and lax implementation, the Arroyo administration has also failed to avert the looming crisis in all ecological niches of the country. President Arroyo and her administration have been directly complicit in passing various laws, policies, and programs that remain alike in one sense: in their orientation towards exporting and selling off the country's remaining natural resources to foreign interests. Instead of protecting and defending our patrimony, this administration is engaging in a grand clearance sale of Philippine forests, lands, mineral ores, agricultural produce, biodiversity, water, and marine wealth to the highest foreign bidder. Meanwhile, the people's actions to counter the apparent attacks on the environment, as well as against their very survival, were all met with blatant disregard for their rights.

But the people have nothing to lose by struggling to overturn conditions which exploit them and the country's remaining natural resources: struggles such as the continuing and complementary fight for genuine agrarian reform and national industrialization and for a democratic and sovereign form of government.

The struggle for the environment is the struggle for the people's welfare. The pursuit of effective reforms in the environment sector has to go along with the quest for a better system of governance. This calls for responsible and accountable government ownership

and control of the country's resources toward sustainability, and proactive policies and regulations that serve to protect the environment and the people. And this could only be achieved by setting our country free from foreign plunderers and by seriously moving toward the protection, conservation and wise utilization of our resources for national development.

Excerpts from:

- *Saving Our Future: A Situationer on the Philippine Environment and Struggles.* Center for Environmental Concerns-Philippines, 2004. www.cecphils.org
- *Energy for Sale: Focus on Biofuels.* Samahan ng Nagtataguyod ng Agham at Teknolohiya Para sa Sambayanan (AGHAM), 2007. www.agham.org
- *Higit Pang Pandarambong at Pandarahas: Kalagayan ng Pagmimina sa Pilipinas, 2007.* Kalikasan PNE. www.kalikasan.org
- *Mining in the Philippines: Concerns and Conflicts. Fact-finding Mission to the Philippines Report.* Columban Fathers, 2007.