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DENR

IN THE NEWS

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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

DENR mulls closure of Mt. Apo campsites

By Dona Z. Pazzibugan

ENVIRONMENT Secretary Ramon Paje wants campsites in Mt. Apo closed following reports that mountaineers caused the raging forest fire that broke out in the country's highest mountain on Saturday.

Paje said he told the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) regional director in Davao, Joselin Fragada, to ask local officials to "temporarily" close Mt. Apo to campers after the fire has been contained.

News reports have quoted bikers and trekkers who were at Mt. Apo when the fire broke out last Saturday afternoon as saying three unidentified mountaineers appeared to be responsible for the fire.

The three mountaineers

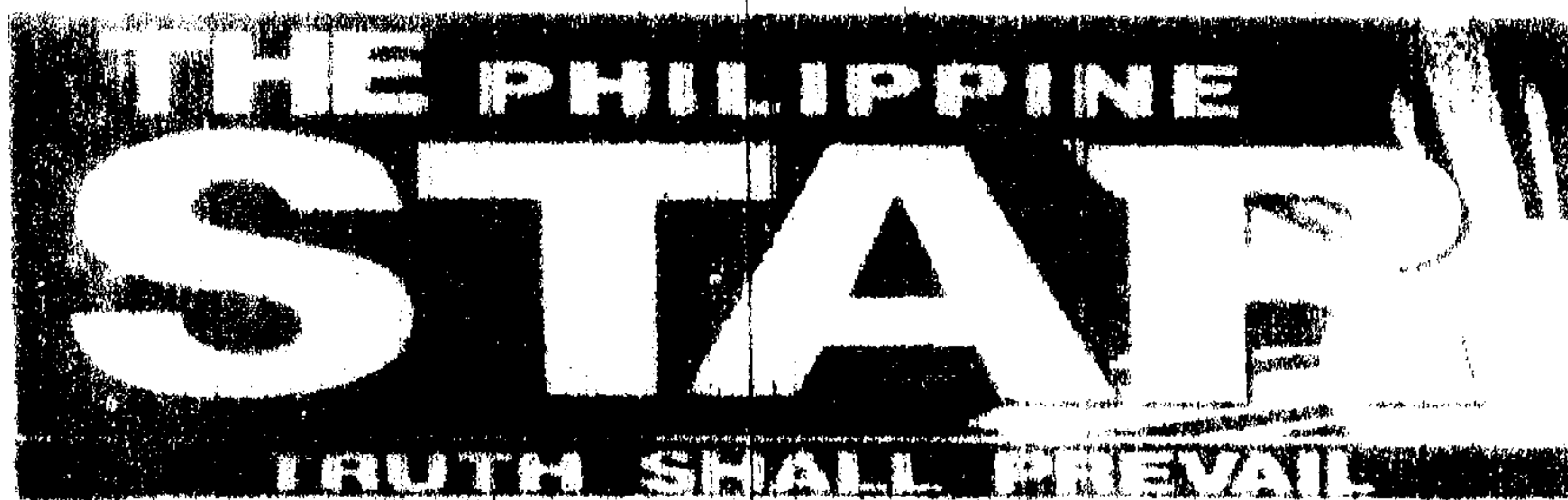
reportedly camped at the peak of the mountain and left without making sure their campfire had been put out.

Paje said barring campers on the mountain will "prevent a repeat of the fire incident."

The DENR chief also pointed out that the risk of forest fires had increased due to the long dry spell and high temperatures.

At least 40 DENR personnel based in Digos City have been providing "technical" support to firefighters battling the rapidly spreading fire, according to Paje.

The DENR regional office in Davao City has also provided equipment to the seven fire-fighting teams created by local government units, Bureau of Fire Protection and the Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction Management Council.



The only paper you read from cover to cover!

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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

Mt. Apo to be closed to trekkers

By RHODINA VILLANUEVA

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) is set to issue a directive declaring Mt. Apo off limits to trekkers.

Environment Secretary Ramon Paje yesterday said they are just waiting for the assessment of a forest fire on the mountain, which was categorized as "alarmingly large."

Paje said he directed Joselin Marcus Fragada, DENR-Davao region director,

to discuss the move with concerned local executives.

Mt. Apo, the country's highest mountain, straddles Davao City, North Cotabato and Davao del Sur.

Reports reaching the DENR central office said the fire had so far razed around 350 hectares of grasslands.

The DENR deployed 40 technical personnel to assist local government units, the Bureau of Fire Protection and Provincial Disaster Risk

Reduction and Management Council in putting out the fire.

"The composite teams... are providing assistance, particularly in the use of geographical position system or GPS and control maps, as well as the establishment of fire lines to prevent the blaze from spreading," Paje said.

A fire line is a gap in vegetation or combustible materials that will act as

barrier to slow down or stop the fire from spreading.

"The fire should be contained as soon as possible so it will not crawl into the inner areas," Paje said.

He said an Air Force helicopter conducted water bucket operations to douse the fire.

"Water dropping commenced at 9 a.m. on Tuesday but ended at 11:30 a.m. due to poor visibility."

total of 10 buckets equivalent to 30 drums were dropped," he said.

Paje said the blaze is expected to be put out today.

Davao Archbishop Romulo Valles said he was saddened that the fire, which started along the Kidapawan City trail on Saturday, continues to devastate more areas.

"The move of the government to close Mt. Apo makes sense," Valles said.

Meanwhile, the Albay Provincial Environment and Management Office (PENRO) said slash-and-burn farming triggered the grass fires on Mayon Volcano last week.

Benjamin Medel, PENRO officer, said some 75 hectares of grasslands were affected.

"We have stationed two forest rangers to monitor those who are engaged in slash-and-burn farming," said Medel. — With Celso Amo, Evelyn Macairan

1 story

THE REPORT OF PHILIPPINE PROGRESS
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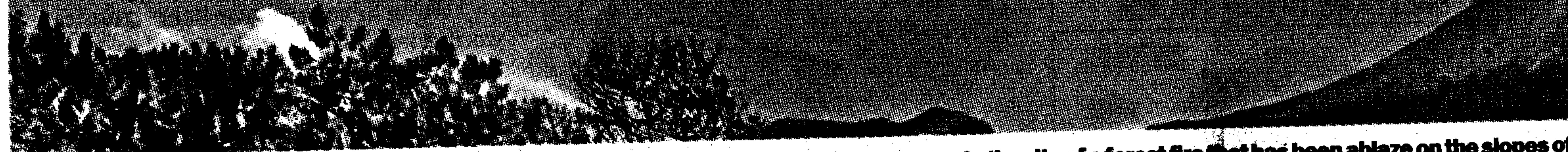
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Mt. Apo fire may be out by today – DENR

Manila, Philippines (AP) — A forest fire on Mount Apo, the highest peak in the Philippines, may be out by today, Wednesday, DENR officials said. The fire, which broke out on Sunday, has razed more than 300 hectares of forest land. The chopper painstakingly picked up the water from the Lake Mirror Mountain Resort in Kapatagan, Digos.

Philippine Air Force helicopter proceeds to deliver a hellbucket of water to the site of a forest fire that has been ablaze on the slopes of Mt. Apo. The fire has razed more than 300 hectares of forest land. The chopper painstakingly picked up the water from the Lake Mirror Mountain Resort in Kapatagan, Digos.



DROP IN THE BUCKET – A Philippine Air Force helicopter proceeds to deliver a hellbucket of water to the site of a forest fire that has been ablaze on the slopes of Mt. Apo. The fire has razed more than 300 hectares of forest land. The chopper painstakingly picked up the water from the Lake Mirror Mountain Resort in Kapatagan, Digos.

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Mt. Apo Fire may be out today - DENR

the fire. "About 20 to 30 hectares of the affected area were dipterocarp forest, which is part of the reforestation area of the Energy Development Corporation, while the rest are grasslands," he said.

"We are hoping that we can stop the fire immediately because we do not want the fire to reach the forested area where the century-old trees are located. If fire reaches this area, it will be more difficult to stop the fire," he added.

"Each of the seven composite teams now up in Mt. Apo has DENR personnel providing technical assistance, particularly in the use of geographical position system or GPS and control maps, including the establishment of fire lines to prevent the fire from further spreading," he explained.

A fire line is a gap in vegetation or other combustible materials that will act as barrier to slow down the fire from spreading.

While the fire is expected to be put out today, its impact on the Mt. Apo Natural Park (MANP) might have already taken its toll on the flora and fauna in the area, Edward Ragasa, DENR-11 Parks Operations Superintendent, said in an interview with the Manila Bulletin Tuesday evening.

Most of the affected areas are grasslands while the forested areas particularly those classified as open and close canopy areas were not severely affected by fire.

Forested areas, around 20 hectares near Lake Venado were only affected, Ragasa said, adding that the firefighting operations will continue until the fire is completely contained and quelled.

"Our focus now will be on prevention and to establish more fire lines," he pointed out.

Home to endemic species

MANP is the home to around 800 vascular and non-vascular plant species and considered endemic in the area; an estimated 272 species of birds of which 40 percent or 111 are considered endemic to Mt. Apo. Two of these species are now listed as critical, including the Philippine Eagle (*Pithecophaga jefferyi*) and Abukay (*Cacatua heamatorygia*) while another 10 are already considered endangered species, among them are the Mindanao scops owl (*Otus mirus*); the lesser eagle owl (*Bubo philippensis*); Mindanao lorikeet (*Tricoglossus johnstoniae*); the whittied hornbill (*Aceros leucocephalus*).

Situated at 3,143.6 meters above sea level MANP is a declared protected area and is being managed by the Protected Area Management Board (PAMB) composed of the cities of Davao, Digos, and municipalities of Sta. Cruz and Bansalan all in Davao del Sur and the City of Kidapawan and the towns of Makilala and Magpet in North Cotabato.

Paje said initial reports point to human factor as the cause of the forest fire, which started at the Campsite 3. Mt. Apo is famous to campers and trekkers, especially during summer. "After the assessment and we have determined the cause of the fire, we will be issuing a directive similar to the policy adopted at Mt. Banahaw where a moratorium on human activities in certain areas has been extended until February 2019," he pointed out. (With a report from Leslie Ann G. Aquino)

PEOPLES JOURNALS

Everybody's Newspaper

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DENR deploys personnel to help contain Mt. Apo fire

THE Department of Environment and Natural Resources has deployed at least 40 technical personnel to assist in containing the forest fire that erupted on Mt. Apo since Saturday.

DENR Secretary Ramon Paje directed DENR Region 11 Director Joselin Marcus Fragada to discuss with concerned local executives the plan to temporarily close the country's highest peak to campers to prevent a repeat of the fire incident.

"Upon hearing about the incident, we lost no time mobilizing our personnel from our provincial and community environment and natural of-

fices in Digos City to help prevent the spread of forest fire in the nearby areas," Paje said.

The DENR regional office in Davao City has been providing equipment and technical support to composite teams of concerned local government units, the Bureau of Fire Protection and the Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction Management Council that were tasked in suppressing the wildfire.

"Each of the seven composite teams now up in Mt. Apo has DENR personnel providing technical assistance, particularly in the use of geographical position system or GPS and control maps, including the

establishment of fire lines to prevent the fire from further spreading," Paje said.

Paje also said that a Super Huey chopper from the Philippine Air Force was deployed in the area to conduct water bucket operation.

"Water dropping commenced at 9 a.m. on Tuesday but ended at 11:30 a.m. due to poor visibility. A total of 10 buckets equivalent to 30 drums have been dropped," he said.

Paje said the risk of fire had increased as the long dry spell and high temperatures left large amounts of flammable debris in forest areas.

Joel dela Torre

The Manila Times

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

DENR personnel assist in Apo fire

THE Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) has deployed at least 40 technical personnel to assist in the containment of forest fire that erupted on Mount Apo since Saturday.

As this developed, Environment Secretary Ramon Paje directed DENR Region 11 Director Joselin Marcus Fragada to discuss with concerned local executives the plan to temporarily close the country's highest peak to campers to prevent a repeat of the fire incident.

"Upon hearing about the incident, we lost no time mobilizing our personnel from our provincial and community environment and natural offices in Digos City to help prevent the spread of forest fire in nearby areas," Paje said.

The DENR chief said that the regional office in Davao City has been providing equipment and technical support to composite teams of concerned local government units, the Bureau of Fire Protection and the Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction Management Council (PDRRMC) that were tasked with suppressing

the wildfire.

"Each of the seven composite teams now up in Mount Apo has DENR personnel providing technical assistance, particularly in the use of geographical position system or GPS and control maps, including the establishment of fire lines to prevent the fire from further spreading," Paje said.

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"Water dropping commenced at 9 am on Tuesday but ended at 11:30 am due to poor visibility. A total of 10 buckets equivalent to 30 drums have been dropped," he said.

Paje also noted that the risk of fire had increased as the long dry spell and high temperatures left large amounts of flammable debris in forest areas.

JAMES KONSTANTIN GALVEZ

THE NATIONAL NEWSPAPER

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DENR wants Mt. Apo closed to trekkers

THE Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) is planning to close Mt. Apo to trekkers in the wake of the fire that started at its top last Saturday noon.

DENR Secretary Ramon Paje said he wanted to close Mt. Apo to campers not just for a few years but "forever."

Similar to Mounts Banahaw and San Cristobal in Calabarzon region, he said the agency may soon declare Mt. Apo off-limits to trekkers.

Paje said he has ordered DENR Davao Region Director Joselin Marcus Fragada to discuss with local executives the ban on the country's highest peak to prevent a repeat of the fire incident.

He said at least 40 technical personnel of the DENR were deployed to assist in the containment of the fire.

"Upon hearing about the incident, we lost no time mobilizing

our personnel from our provincial and community environment and natural offices in Digos City to help prevent the spread of forest fire in nearby areas," Paje said.

He said the DENR regional office in Davao City has been providing equipment and technical support to composite teams of concerned local government units, the Bureau of Fire Protection and the Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction Management Council (PDRPMC) that were tasked with suppressing the wildfire.

"Each of the seven composite teams now up in Mt. Apo has DENR personnel providing technical assistance, particularly in the use of geographical position system or GPS and control maps, including the establishment of fire lines to prevent the fire from further spreading," Paje said.— *Angela Lopez de Leon*

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EDITORIAL

Protecting forests

IF there is one thing we do not need at this time of severe hot weather, it is runaway forest fires.

It is bad enough that the whole country is scorching under the extreme El Niño extreme weather episode.

Farmlands are wilting, wetlands are drying up, crops are being destroyed, and harvests are dwindling to record lows, triggering fears of a massive food shortage and even hunger.

The most glaring effect of El Niño is forest fires, which are threatening to wipe out what is left of the country's lush vegetation.

What to do to prevent such catastrophic event?

One way is to deploy more forest guards and other environmental monitors to check the spread of either natural or man-made fires. Currently, the government has a minimal number of such guards securing our vast forest resources.

There's only one forest guard for every 3,376 hectares of forestland, rendering the country's diminishing woodlands prone to poachers and leaving no frontline personnel to stomp out fires like the one raging on the slopes of Mount Apo, the country's highest peak.

"In fact, the lack of forest rangers had reached general alarm a long time ago," said Senate President Pro-Tempore Ralph Recto, who got data on the dearth of forest guards from official reports sent to the Senate.

Recto said authorities should "now scramble to deploy more forest guards" as dry spells and El Niño caused by climate change leave forests tinder dry for long periods.

Another reason Recto cited is the need to protect the gains of the National Greening Program (NGP) which had re-greened 1,125 hectares of mostly logged-over areas with 678 million seedlings since 2011.

"We have invested P24 billion for this massive reforestation program," Recto said, citing NGP's budget from 2011 to 2015. "We have to protect this investment. Parang mahal na bahay 'yan, kailangan ng fire extinguisher at fire insurance."

The nationwide lack of forest guards can be gleaned from the number assigned in the Mount Apo National Park, which has 16 regular forest rangers guarding 54,975 hectares of main protected area, Recto said.

"That's one guard for every 3,465 hectares," Recto said.

"But if we include the 9,000 hectares of buffer and peripheral areas, the ratio goes up to almost one ranger per 4,000 hectares," he added.

The same personnel lack also plagues other parks. In 2014, it was reported that there were only three full-time forest guards patrolling the 11,000-hectare Mount Banahaw protected area in Southern Tagalog.

About two dozen forest guards protect the 6,600-hectare Ipo Watershed in Bulacan from illegal loggers. That watershed forms part of the larger Angat watershed that supplies 97% of Metro Manila's water.

But to the credit of the Aquino government, more guards and funds are being sent to forest frontiers, Recto said.

"There is now a forest protection fund of about P500 million. The budget for protected areas management has gone up to P720 million a year," he said.

"Like in previous years, these allocations should fund the hiring of contractual forest guards," Recto said. "But what we need are regular guards," the senator admitted.

"Aside from hiring more manpower, forest protection equipment should also be procured and deployed. At present, there are no dedicated firetrucks for forest-fire suppression," Recto said.

"Hindi rin 'yan nakakapagtaka, kasi nga 420 towns natin ay walang fire stations at mayroon lang tayong 1,574 firetrucks, or almost one fire station per town lang," Recto said.



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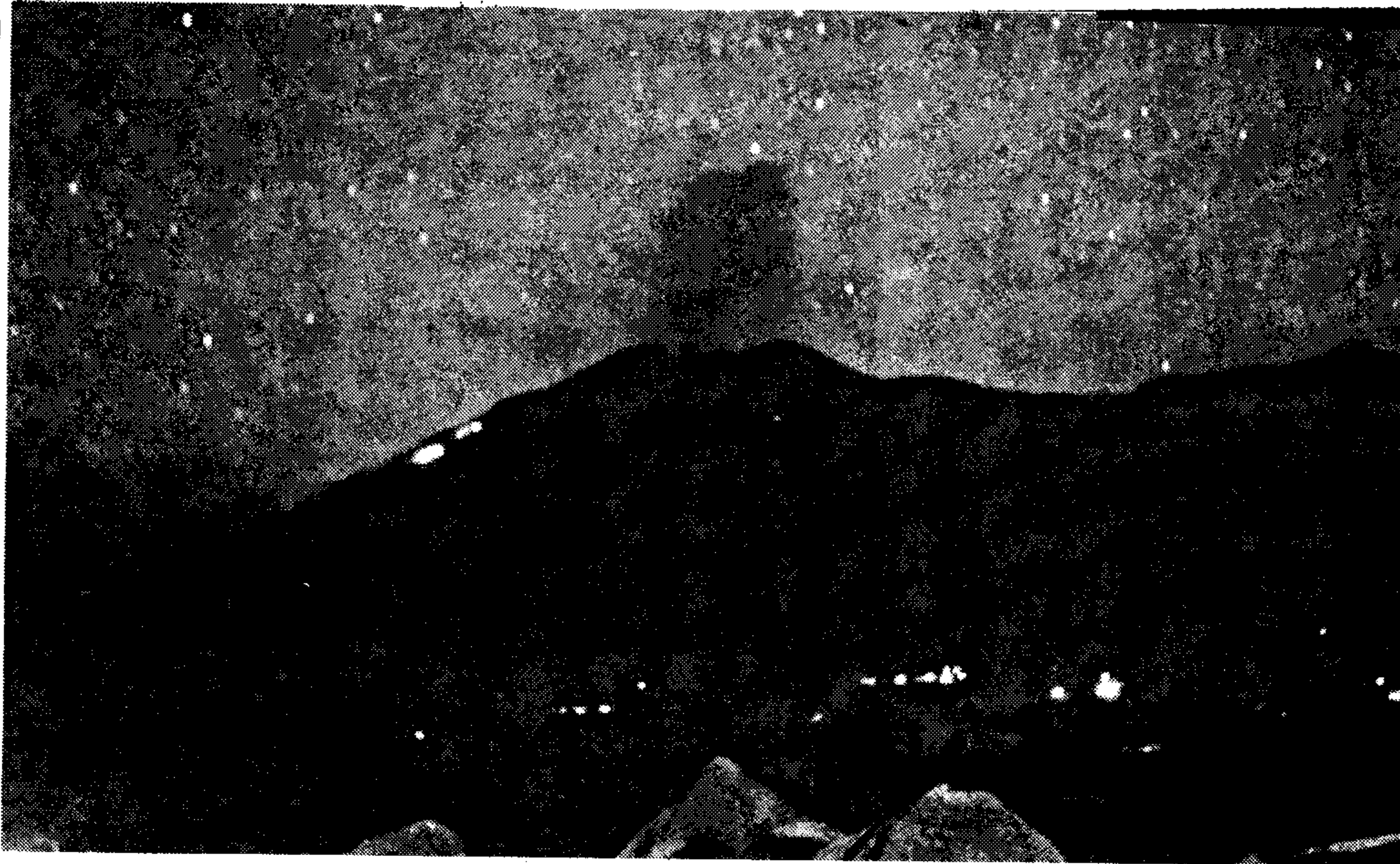
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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE



MT. KANLAON spews ash and fiery rocks on Tuesday night. The fiery rocks triggered grass fires near the volcano's crater.

JIGZ SANTIAGO/CONTRIBUTOR

Mt. Kanlaon erupts, ignites grass fires near volcano crater

By Carla P. Gomez
Inquirer Visayas

BACOLOD CITY—Government authorities are working against time to put out a fire near the crater of Mount Kanlaon that could spread to a forest area.

Provincial Environment and Natural Resources Officer Andres Untal said a long column of grass fires were raging at the upper Mansalanao, Cabagnaan and Biak na Bato portions of the volcano in La Castellana town in Negros Occidental.

The fire was suspected to have been caused by materials spewed during the explosion on Tuesday and there was a possibility that it could reach the forested area about 4 kilometers away, he added.

Untal said the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Bureau of Fire Protection, office of the Mt. Kanlaon Natural Park Protected Area Superintendent, and Negros Occidental

Provincial Risk Reduction Management Division were organizing a group of fire-fighters to put out the fire.

Zeaphard Gerhart Caelian, Negros Occidental Provincial Disaster Management Program Division chief, said they were putting together a team that would create a line to prevent the fire from crossing to the forest.

Mount Kanlaon, an active volcano located on Negros Island, remained restive yesterday although it was calmer compared to Tuesday's night steam-driven or phreatic eruption.

The volcano was seen emitting moderate white

smoke up to 500 meters above the crater.

From the southwest side of the volcano, the plume was observed to have reached 1,500 meters above the active crater.

Traces of ashfall were reported in La Carlota City and Pontevedra town in Negros Occidental, said Isagani Republica of the Negros Occidental Provincial Disaster Management Program Division.

Mount Kanlaon, which straddles the provinces of Negros Occidental and Negros Oriental, is a favorite spot for climbers.

With its twin-peaked

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Mt. Kanlaon erupts, ignites grass pines near volcano crater

massif rising 2,465 meters above sea level, the volcano is a centerpiece of Mount Kanlaon Natural Park, a national park located at least 30 km from Bacolod City.

On Nov. 24 last year, the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology hoisted Alert Level 1 following a phreatic explosion.

The alert level indicated that the volcano remained in an abnormal condition and was in a period of unrest.

Trekking was strictly prohibited especially in the 4-kilometer permanent danger zone due to the possibility of another explosion.

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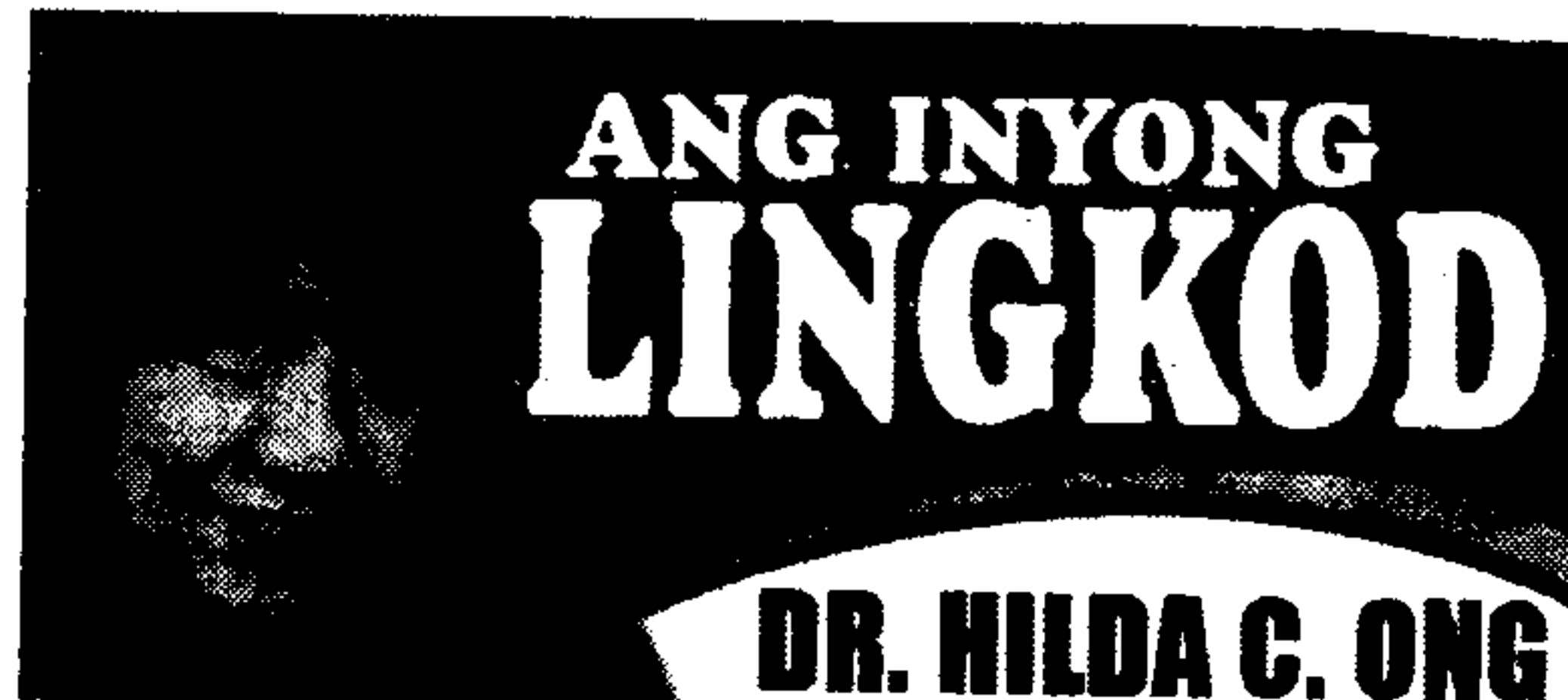
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SUMABAY na ang Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) sa modernong panahon, patunay ryan ang proyektong "Lawin Forest and Biodiversity Protection System" (LFBPS) na layon na higit na mabigyang proteksyon ang mga protected area ng bansa ayon sa Republic Act No. 7586 (National Integrated Protected Areas System).

Kamakailan ay naganap sa Fuyot Spring National Park (FSNP) sa Ilagan City, Isabela ang paglagda sa "guidelines and mechanics for the national adoption" ng programa sa pagitan nina director Ricardo Calderon ng Forest Management Bureau at Teresa Mundita-Lim ng Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB). Sinaksihan ito nina DENR Undersecretary Demetriou L. Ignacio at Isabela Governor Faustino Dy. Ang FSNP ay bahagi ng 360,000 ektaryang Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park (NSMNP), ang pinakamalaking



'PROTECTED AREAS' MAS MABABANTAYAN SA TULONG NG WIRELESS TECHNOLOGY

king protektadong lugar ng bansa.

Ikinagalak naman ni Secretary Ramon J.P. Paje ang pagkakaroon ng LFBPS, ika nga niya "Technology and its applications (like the LFBPS) will surely allow us to cope with the different challenges the environment faces."

We see it as a way for us to come up with better ways to reverse environmental degradation and biodiversity loss, and at a faster pace."

Ang LFBPS ay pinagtulangang likhain ng DENR at ng Biodiversity and Watersheds Improved for Stronger Economy and Ecosystem Resilience (B+WISER) Program ng United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

Malaking tulong sa mga park ranger at bumubuo sa Protected Area Management Board (PAMB) upang magkaroon ng aktuwal na kaalaman at deskripsyon ukol sa kalagayan ng protected area at dagliang maiugnay sa kinauukulang awtoridad para sa karampatang aksyon.

Inaasahan din na mapauunlad ng LFBPS ang "response mechanisms" ng mga tauhan ng DENR, lokal na pamahalaan, at law enforcement agencies kaugnay sa pagpapatupad ng biodiversity, forest at wildlife laws, partikular sa mga tinataguriang "hotspots".

Bilang bahagi ng programa, sumailalim sa masusising pagsasanay ang 670 wildlife workers na binubuo ng mga resource and data managers at community monitors na pawang mga katu-tubo.

Higit nila kasing kabisa-do at kapado ang mga protektadong lugar dahil sila ay kabahagi ng mga ito.

Ang LFBPS ay pina-

patakbo ng isang web-based system at open-source software na tinatawag na "CyberTracker" na siyang kumukha ng datus at Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool (SMART) na dumaraan sa proseso ng data analysis, mapping at report generation.

Pwedeng mailipat sa Google maps ang mga datus at ulat mula sa "CyberTracker" at "SMART" upang makagawa ng kaukulang pagpapasya hinggil sa nakitang mga aktibidades o kalagayan ng protektadong lugar.

Nagsimula ang pilot testing ng LFBPS noong taong 2015 sa FSNP at sa iba pang B+WISER project sites na may kabuuang lawak na 442,000 ektarya kabilang ang NSMNP sa lalawigan ng Cagayan at Isabela, Region II; Kaliwa-Upper Marikina Watersheds in Tanay, Rizal at General Nakar, Quezon; Naujan Lake National Park sa Oriental Mindoro; Quinali "A" Watershed sa Albay; Bago Watershed Forest Reserve sa Negros Occidental; Mt. Kitanglad Natural Park sa Bukidnon; at Mt. Apo Natural Park sa Southern Mindanao. Sa buong taong pilot testing, napatunayan na epektibo ang wireless application upang makita ang anomang pagbabago sa loob ng protektadong lugar gamit ang Geographical Information System o GIS.

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Mountaineers behind Mt. Apo fire?

COTABATO CITY — Three unidentified mountain climbers who stayed at the peak of the country's highest mountain are believed to be responsible for the bushfire that escalated into a forest fire at Mt. Apo, according to a group of bikers and trekkers from Cotabato City who witnessed the start of the fire from a distance.

Members of the Cotabato All-Terrain Bikers Association (CATBA) said they believe the fire actually started at the peak, where there were three campers who cooked food on Saturday afternoon.

Tutin Sapto, CATBA founding member, said he personally witnessed the start of the unfortunate incident and took pictures from afar after they set up tent in the lower portion of Lake Venado.

"We were told there were three climbers who set up tent at the peak and cooked and left not knowing there was still fire," Mr. Sapto recalled being told by other mountaineers.

Mr. Sapto said he and his colleagues expressed desire to help put out the fire, "but we were prevented from going there. We panicked and in dismay while watching the fire eating up a large portion of the peak."

"Instead, we were directed to use the Mandarangan trail as our exit route as the fire started to spread," he added.

Mr. Sapto said his team of 24 climbers used the Kapatagan trail in Digos City, Davao del Sur in climbing Mt. Apo. They arrived at a camp on the Kapatagan side of the mountain in the afternoon of Good Friday and slept there, then climbed to the peak before dawn on Saturday so they could witness the sunrise.

As part of every mountaineer's tradition who climbs Mt. Apo, the group went down to Lake Venado on the other side of the peak on Saturday afternoon to set up tents.

And then they noticed smoke billowing from the peak of Mt. Apo a few hours after they left the area.

Mr. Sapto said they were scheduled to leave the next morning, Easter Sunday. They were supposed to climb back to the peak, then follow their trail back to Kapatagan as policy requires that mountaineers should exit where they began their climb.

But because of the fire, they were told by climbing guides that they should divert their route and exit immediately through the Mandarangan trail in the Kidapawan-Makilala-Magpet eco-triangle.

Joey Recemilla, Kidapawan tourism officer and chair of the EcoTourism Committee of the Mt. Apo Natural Park-Protected Area Management Board, said when there is a reported fire, protocol requires all climbers to

take the nearest and safest entry, which in last Saturday's case was via Kidapawan.

"To be honest, when we were at the peak, the surrounding was really dry and brown, although occasionally there were fogs," Mr. Sapto said.

He said the fire from the peak has spread toward Digos City side of the mountain heading toward Kapatagan trail.

"How sad some climbers were irresponsible and were not careful in their acts. Climbing should be accompanied by responsibility," Mr. Sapto lamented.

More than 300 hectares have already been eaten by fire as of Wednesday in a large swathe of the eco-park and is now starting to engulf a watershed area in the Talomo District in Davao City.

Firefighters from Davao City's Central 911 and volunteers from nearby towns have trooped to the area, and the Philippine Air Force have sent equipment and personnel.

In a related development, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) has directed its Region XI office to discuss with local officials the plan to temporarily seal off Mt. Apo.

The DENR has deployed at least 40 technical personnel to assist in containing the forest fires.

"Each of the seven composite teams now up in Mt. Apo has

DENR personnel providing technical assistance, particularly in the use of geographical position system or GPS and control maps including the establishment of fire lines to prevent the fire from further spreading," DENR chief Ramon P. Paje said.

Joselino Marcus E. Fragada, regional director and chairman of the Protected Area Management Board, said there is no decision yet on closing the area.

The board governs every protected area in the Philippines including Mt. Apo under the National Integrated Protected Areas System Act of 1992.

"For now the suppression of fire is still ongoing," said Liza R. Mazo, Davao regional director of the Office of Civil Defense.

The Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP) and other agencies have also been involved in this disaster-relief effort, which, however, has proved a challenging task.

"As of [5:00 p.m. yesterday] more than 300 hectares are affected by the fire which is now slightly escalating... to Sta. Cruz in [the] Davao City area," said Senior Inspector Nestor G. Jimenez of the BFP-Davao.

Mr. Paje said the risk of fire has increased as the long dry spell and high temperatures left large amounts of flammable debris in forest areas. — **Ferdinand Cabrera/MindaNews, Janina C. Lim**

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Wind rekindles fire on Mt. Apo; wild animals flee

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By Inquirer Mindanao

DIGOS CITY—Fanned by a strong wind, the fire that broke out on Mount Apo on Saturday raged anew in Davao del Sur province on Tuesday night, but officials were hoping that it would not breach the fire line that volunteers had started putting up.

Wild animals have fled from the burning forest and grasslands of Apo, the country's highest peak, an official disclosed on Wednesday.

"The fire rekindled on Tuesday night due to a strong wind and is expected to eat more areas as it is now within the Talomo side," said Harry Camoro, provincial risk reduction management officer.

More than 100 volunteers were working double time in the villages of Tumpis and Kolan in Sta. Cruz town to prevent the fire from eating up the centuries-old "almaciga" tree, a landmark along the Sibulan Trail.

The volunteers, equipped with shovels and machetes, neared the fire zone to conduct clearing operations, Camoro said. They were expected to work long hours in the area, with an ample supply of canned goods, noodles, rice and water donated by groups and individuals, he said.

Dozens of members of indigenous communities in North Cotabato province arrived as reinforcements in Barangay Kapatagan here on Wednesday.

Eduardo Ragaza, national parks supervisor of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) in Southern Mindanao, said an Air Force helicopter resumed its flights to douse the flame, which had burned more than 300 hectares of land since Saturday, with water scooped from a lake in Kapatagan.

A drone from Davao City's Central 911 also surveyed the burning area. Its findings will be used to determine the extent of the damage of the fire, which started near the peak on Black Saturday and areas covered by the fire line, Camoro said.

Current efforts were focused on putting out the fire as soon as possible, Ragaza said. Investigation of persons

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WIND REKINDLES FIRE ON MT. APO

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who actually started the fire will come later despite reports pointing to a group of campers.

More than 1,000 people climbed Apo during Holy Week despite the number cap agreed on by local government units. For example, Sta. Cruz listed more than 500 who were allowed to pass through the Sibulan Trail.

Nelly Nita Dillera, director of the Department of Tourism in Central Mindanao, said she would recommend the mountain's closure for at least five years so it could recover from the devastating fire.

In Kidapawan City, the movement of a large number of wild animals was monitored on Apo since the fire struck,

according to Joey Recimilla, city tourism officer.

Volunteers who put up a fire line on the North Cotabato side of the mountain found tracks and droppings of the animals in flight, Recimilla said. "These are all indications that animal movement or migration is happening on the mountain," he said.

Based on the tracks and droppings, the wild animals, including boars, rats, lizards, birds and deer, headed toward Lake Venado and other safe places, he added. *Reports from Orlando Dinoy, Eldie Aguirre, Williamor Magbanua, Edwin Fernandez and Germelina Lacorte, Inquirer Mindanao*

THE DAILY **tribune**

Without fear or favor

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Mt. Apo fire The forest fire that continues to raze a big area of Mt. Apo threatens the habitat of the endangered Philippine eagle. The Department of Environment and Natural Resources has deployed at least 40 technical personnel to assist in the containment of forest fire that hit the country's highest peak.

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Epekto ng sunog sa flora & fauna sa Mt. Apo, pinangangambahan

NI ALEXANDER D. LOPEZ

KAPATAGAN, Davao del Sur - Posibleng nakaapekto na nang matindi ang limang araw nang sunog sa Mount Apo Natural Park (MANP) sa flora and fauna na sa lugar lang na iyon matatagpuan.

Ito ang pagtataya ni Edward Ragasa, Parks Operations Superintendent ng Department of Environment and Natural Resources)-Region 11 nang kapanayamin ng may akda nitong Martes ng gabi.

Sinabi ni Ragasa na kailangang suriin ng kagawaran ang naging pinsala ng sunog sa natural habitat sa MANP at sa

mga halaman at hayop na endemic sa lugar.

Mahigit 250 volunteer na ang nagsisikap sa pag-apula sa pagliliyab na tumupok na sa mahigit 350 ektarya ng bundok, aniya.

Pitong grupo na rin ang itinalaga sa lugar, na binubuo ng mula sa DENR, Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP), at mga lokal na pamahalaan mula sa Regions 11 at 12.

"Our focus now will be on prevention and to establish more fire lines," sabi ni Ragasa.

Ipinagpatuloy na rin ang chopper operation ng Philippine Air Force (PAF) kahapon makaraang bumuti na ang lagay ng panahon.

Nitong Martes, nagpasaklolo na si American Chamber of Commerce in Mindanao (AMCHAM-Mindanao) President Philip Dizon sa gobyerno ng United States upang tumulong sa pag-apula ng sunog sa Mt. Apo.

Nasa MANP ang may 800 vascular at non-vascular plant species na ikinokonsiderang endemic sa lugar; may 272 uri ng ibon din sa bundok, na 40 porsiyento o 111 rito ay sa Mt. Apo lang matatagpuan.



SUNOG SA MOUNT APO Ipinagpatuloy ng Philippine Air Force ang operasyon nitong Miyerkules ng umaga, Marso 30, sa tulong na rin ng Lake Mirror Mountain Resort sa Kapatagan, Digos City, Davao del Sur, upang apulahin ang apoy sa loob ng Mount Apo Natural Park.

ALEXANDER D. LOPEZ

THE EXPONENT OF PHILIPPINE PROGRESS
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Baguio to collect rainwater for plants in parks

By **ZALDY COMANDA**

BAGUIO CITY – The city government and the Ecosystems Research and Development Bureau (ERDB) through its Watershed and Water Resources Research Center (WWRRC) have signed a memorandum of agreement (MOA) for establishing a water-harvesting demonstration.

Mayor Mauricio Domogan signed in behalf of the city with ERDB Acting Director Henry Adornabo; Carlos Arida, of the WWRRC and Cordelia Lacsamana, chief of City Environment and Parks Development Office (CEPMO).

Officials said the city's lack of water to sustain the needs of the parks for the sustenance of flowering plants can be

attributed to the city's huge population and effects of climate change.

The MOA involves the building of a water-harvesting facility for the needs of the city.

As defined, a water-harvesting technology is any man-made or artificial means of impounding or storing rain water, springs, deep well, streams, rivers, lakes and ponds.

ERDB is the principal research and development arm of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) over watershed as well as resources and the implementer of the program on technology transfer and extension services.

The agreement also provides for ERDB to provide technical assistance in

various forms of extension services for the use of bamboo technologies in the rehabilitation of denuded areas within the identified site for water harvesting.

The office will conduct site monitoring and coaching to the city to improve the water harvesting sites.

For its part, the city government will participate in trainings, techno-exhibits as well as to involve the ERDB in the development of the said facility and site.

The city will also promote and showcase sustainable water-harvesting technologies and encourage water harvesting technology adoption by stakeholders and visitors at the Botanical Garden.

Baguio residents are urged to practice rainwater collection.

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Mangrove-planting conducted by Tinago People's Organization in Calbiga, Samar (Restituto A. Cayubit)

DENR-8 reforests 13,000 hectares of mangrove areas

TACLOBAN CITY, Leyte – Over 13,000 hectares of mangrove areas in Eastern Visayas have been reforested last year under the government's National Greening Program (NGP), a report from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources in Region 8 (DENR-8) said.

DENR-8 Regional Director Leonardo Sibbaluca told reporters his office spearheaded the Mangrove and Beach Forest Development Project (MBFDP) with an allotted budget of ₱255,133,000. With this, a total of 13,615 hectares were planted with mangrove and beach forest species as part of climate change mitigation and adaptation measures for last year, he added.

Sibbaluca informed reporters that aside from DENR-8's internal re-greening projects, support to NGP from other institutions and private sectors which include Mining Industry through the mangrove reforestation by Mines-Geo Sciences Bureau in the region also contributed 77.75 hectares of new plantation in their respective areas of concession.

He added that the Millennium Challenge Corporation, through the tree replacement program of the Department of Public Works and Highways, also contributed 931.22 hectares of mangrove planted areas located in the municipalities of Paranas, Samar to Giporlos, Eastern Samar. (Restituto A. Cayubit)

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Newsbits

• Fire destroys 20-ha forest land

AKLAN — As the National Fire Prevention Month draws to a close, a fire destroyed at least 20 hectares of forestland in Tibiawan village, Madalag town, Aklan province of Black Saturday. According to Julius Tiongson, investigator of the Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP-Aklan), the fire broke out from a burning pile of garbage which a local resident had started. The wind helped fan the fire which quickly spread and could not be put out. When the BFP arrived at the scene, the government fireman had to quickly act and stop the fire from spreading to other areas as there was a nearby public school. Although there were no injuries, various species of trees and plants were damaged. Meanwhile, BFP-Aklan urged local residents not to burn their garbage to prevent any fire incident. (Jun Aguirre)

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No presidential bet has green agenda, says priest

By **Gabriel Cardinoza**
Inquirer Northern Luzon
and **Ron Lopez**
Inquirer Central Luzon

BOLINAO, Pangasinan—Not one of the presidential candidates has presented any program on what they intend to do about the environ-

ment, according to running priest Fr. Robert Reyes, noting that he hasn't seen any of the aspirants putting forward a green agenda.

"Nobody's talking about the environment as a banner platform," said Reyes, who has been campaigning against government projects that adversely affect the environment.

Liberal Party standard bearer Mar Roxas champions "yellow politics," which Reyes said was "the contradiction of green."

Reyes blamed Aquino administration officials like Environment Secretary Ramon Paje Jr. and Public Works Secretary Rogelio Singson for the cutting down 1,800 trees last year to give way to a road widening project in eastern Pangasinan.

"I don't know whether or not Mar will uphold green politics. If that's the straight path (*tuwid na daan*), I don't see it to be pro-environment," he said.

Vice President Jejomar Binay of the United Nationalist Alliance,

prefers buildings more than trees, the priest said. This has been demonstrated by Binay's big campaign donations from developers, he said.

"I don't know about [Davao City Mayor Rodrigo] Duterte and [Sen.] Grace Poe. But beside Poe is [Sen.] Chiz Escudero and behind Chiz is Danding Cojuangco," and neither Escudero nor Cojuangco has acted publicly for environmental causes," he said.

No to black politics

Reyes said that instead of being protected, the environment has become "a resource for profit-making, not for the preservation of people's lives. It has become a resource for the preservation of political interests. That is black politics. What we need is green politics."

"We need to push the green agenda with our politicians. I did not see it in the presidential debates. I hope to see it among the vice presidential candidates," he said.

In Bulacan province, an environmental group is supporting the presidential bid of Duterte, calling the Davao City mayor the "action man" who could help save the environment.

Martin Francisco, the chair and president of the Save Sierra Madre Environmental Society Inc. (SSMESI), said Duterte's brand of leadership would be the key to stopping the environmental degradation in the country.

"We need a leader like Duterte who is results-driven and has political will," Francisco said.

Francisco said the Aquino administration has failed to enforce environment laws and policies, particularly in the protection of the Ipo watershed in Norzagaray town which was struck by a series of forest fires in 2014.

"The destruction in the Ipo watershed continues until today. The illegal loggers there are fearless," he said.

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Kanlaon Volcano spews ash

THE Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology said Alert Level 1 remains in effect over Kanlaon Volcano after spewing ash on Tuesday.

The Phivolcs said two minor eruptions occurred at the volcano's crater at 6:20 p.m. and 7:18 p.m. on Tuesday, which lasted around 12 minutes and 25 seconds, respectively.

The first event was accompanied by a booming sound heard in Sitio Guintubdan, Bgy. Ara-al and Bgy. Yubo, La Carlota City and Bgy. Pula Canlaon City, Negros Oriental.

From the southeastern side of the volcano, the eruption plume was observed to have reached 1,500 meters above the crater.

The agency said the incandescent ejecta caused small bushfire at the upper slope as observed from La Castellana.

Traces of light ashfall were reported in Sitio Guintubdan, Bgy. Ara-al, La Carlota City.

State volcanologists said the eruption was followed by two episodes of volcanic tremors.

"Alert Level 1 status remains in effect over Kanlaon Volcano, which means that it is currently in a state of unrest probably driven by hydrothermal processes that could generate more minor eruptions," the Phivolcs said.

NEGROS ORIENTAL COPS ON ALERT
THE Negros Oriental Police Provincial Office activated

its contingency plans for a possible eruption of Kanlaon after the volcano showed signs of life and had minor explosions on Tuesday.

Local police director Sr. Supt. Harris Fama said that in coordination with the local Phivolcs station and other local government agencies, they are watching the activities of the volcano and have reminded the public that entry into the 4-kilometer radius permanent danger zone is strictly prohibited due to the possibility of sudden and hazardous steam driven or minor ash eruption.

Fama said civil aviation authorities also advised pilots to avoid flying close to the volcano summit as airborne ash from sudden eruption can be hazardous to their aircraft.

The Negros Oriental police chief said that all contingency preparations are in place in case of a volcano eruption. They include the activation of disaster incident management task groups and the employment of an alarm and warning system such as the use of police sirens and other portable warning system capable of producing loud wailing sounds to alarm local residents.

Fama said that in the event of an eruption, the Negros Oriental police's monitoring center will be co-located at the Provincial Disaster Management Committee.

Fama said there will also be forced relocation/pre-emptive evacuation of residents in the permanent danger zone in coordination with local government officials of Canlaon City. **Melnio Ragasa-Jimena, Alfred Dalizon**

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Laguna Lakeshore project turns unattractive to prospective investors

By Doris Dumlao-Abadilla

EVEN the corporate giant perceived by rivals as the most inclined to bid for the \$2.7-billion Laguna Lakeshore expressway and dike project—the biggest project auctioned off by the Aquino administration under the public private partnership (PPP) framework—doubts the viability of the project.

San Miguel Corp. president Ramon S. Ang yesterday said the conglomerate did not participate in the recent bidding for the Laguna Lakeshore project due to the “mind-boggling” demand for equity and the structure of the project as a real estate rather than an infrastructure play.

It was earlier thought that SMC would be the party most capable of bidding aggressively for the Laguna Lakeshore project because of its natural connectivity to the conglomerate’s existing tollroad project, the Southeast Metro Manila Expressway (C6), a possible alter-

nate route from the Calabarzon (Cavite-Laguna-Batangas-Rizal-Quezon) area to the metropolis.

The bidding was declared a failure as not a single offer was submitted.

In a briefing during yesterday’s listing of SMC’s P30 billion worth of preferred shares, Ang said project proponent Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) had wanted the prospective private sector partner to cough out two-thirds of the total equity requirement.

“I think no company in the Philippines or maybe in Asia or in the world will come and invest that kind of money in a real estate project,” Ang said.

Ang said Laguna Lakeshore was originally pitched as a tollroad project. But upon closer scrutiny, he said, it would end up as a real estate play as 95 percent of the revenue would come from property development while only a small share would come from the tollroad com-

ponent. At the same time, Ang said there was a limit to the number of lanes that could be put up.

The project seeks to develop a 47-kilometer (km) six-lane expressway with a 45-km control dike and reclaim 700 hectares of land. The proposed highway will run from Taguig, Metro Manila through the towns of Calamba to the Los Baños-Bay boundary in Laguna. It will also include the construction of interchanges, bridges, floodgates, and pumps, from Taguig to Los Baños and the reclamation of land abutting the expressway-dike.

Other potential bidders were also concerned about the government’s inability to guarantee linkage to major road networks like C5 and C6 which are undertaken by private concessionaires. Being the C6 proponent, SMC is seen to have an advantage as far as connectivity is concerned.

But even SMC is wary of the “uncertain investment” under the structure proposed by the DPWH.

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Alsons Power bags awards from DENR

THE Department of Environment and Natural Resources-Environmental Management Bureau (DENR-EMB) recently gave multiple awards to Alsons Power Group subsidiaries: the Sarangani Energy Corp. in Maasim, Sarangani (SEC), the Southern Philippines Power Corp. (SPPC) in Alabel, Sarangani, and the Western Mindanao Power Corp. (WMPC) in Zamboanga City for company best practices.

SPPC and WMPC both earned recognitions for their cooperation with their respective Multi-partite Monitoring Teams (MMT), with the former winning the "Best Management Practice on Reporting" and the latter copping "Best Management Practice on Stakeholders Participation in Region IX."

The MMT is one way to ensure that companies adhere to the conditions outlined in

their respective environmental compliance certificates issued by the DENR. Each MMT is composed of representatives from various stakeholders including local government units, non-government organizations, women, youth, indigenous communities, the academe, Provincial Environment and Natural Resources Office, Community Environment and Natural Resources Office and the regional office of Environmental Management Bureau.

SPPC was also recognized for its "Adopt an Estero/Water Body" program which involved reforestation activities as well as the clean up of the Maribulan River. Likewise, the DENR-EMB granted SEC the "Best Management Practice on Conflict Management" for its effective management of environment-related issues in Sarangani.

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OceanaGold permit extended 5 years

AUSTRALIAN mining firm OceanaGold Corp. has received a five-year extension to the exploration period of its Financial or Technical Assistance Agreement (FTAA) for its 158-square kilometre Didipio gold and copper mining project located in the provinces of Nueva Vizcaya and Quirino.

"This is a positive outcome for all stakeholders that will allow the company to expand its exploration program over the broader region around Didipio. We are now reviewing and prioritising targets and expect to provide clarity around the planned exploration programs in the coming weeks," Mick Wilkes, OceanaGold president and chief executive officer, said in a statement.

FTAA is an agreement between a contractor and the government for large-scale exploration, development and utilization of gold, copper, nickel, chromite, lead, zinc and other minerals.

OceanaGold was the first foreign company to obtain an FTAA in the country back in 1994.

OceanaGold said over the past few years, previous geochemical sampling has identified several gold and copper soil anomalies in close proximity to its Didipio operation, prompting it to re-examine and prioritize drill program for the FTAA bounded area that will be submitted in the coming weeks.

The company also revealed that for the first half of the year, it will continue to drill near mine targets as it starts infill and extensional drilling of the underground resource in the second half.

"With continued strong cash flows expected from our operations in 2016 and higher production at even lower costs expected in 2017, the company is well positioned to further increase its resource base organically and through selective external opportunities," Wilkes said.

"With the granting of our exploration permit renewal in the Philippines, we will now expand our exploration program in 2016 to include the significant opportunities that exist for us there," Wilkes added.

The company said total reserves in the Didipio project currently stands at 1.55 million ounces (Moz) of gold, 3.22 Moz of silver and 0.18 metric tons of copper.

Earlier, the Mines and Geosciences Bureau said OceanaGold is among the few metallic mines in the country with an International Organization for Standardization 14001 certification which makes it capable of being granted with ore transport permit to export minerals abroad.



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PMAP summit on clean air, climate change to be held April 12-13

By NOEL P. LACAMBRA (OJT)

THE leadership of the People Management Association of the Philippines Human Resources Management Foundation Inc., (PMAP-HRF) has expressed appreciation for the over-whelming support of the PMAP Summit on Clean Air and Climate Change by the PMAP members, local government units of Cavite, Rizal, Palawan, Quezon City, City of San Fernando, Pampanga and Pasig City sponsors from the business community, Clean Air Advocates of the Philippines and the government led by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

The sponsors and leaders of various sectors participating in the summit have expressed

deep concern over the continuing degradation of the environment in our country and its effect on the lives, well being and livelihood of millions of people.

The effects of climate change can no longer be ignored or merely passed on as annual incidents. Our country has experienced the effects of climate change. Typhoons visiting the country have become stronger and more frequent, diseases attributed to waste and pollutions are on the rise. The socio economic losses are staggering. On the other hand, there are emerging technologies and new human interventions which promise to alleviate our situation that will help and hopefully will mitigate the agony of many.

As an organization engaged in people management, PMAP has the responsibility of charting ways to im-

prove the situation of its members by educating its clients and employees with their families and communities on the best ways to reduce pollution, clean the environment, and protect their health. The effects of polluted air and climate change, if not mitigated, will negate all of the progress achieved so far, i.e. loss of jobs and employment, and more disasters to manage.

The PMAP Clean Air and Climate Change Summit will be held on April 12-13, 2016 at the Sofitel Philippines Plaza, Pasay City to call the attention of member companies and the people that depend on them to be more conscious about the effects of climate change and the challenges that will confront them in the future. From hereon, the PMAP HRM Foundation will assert its social responsibility to make a difference in the way

people will live and survive under these unusual times and to create the conditions to enable business and sources of livelihood to flourish to benefit all.

The PMAP-HRF laud the efforts of many of the 1,400 PMAP member companies who have incorporated climate change mitigation in their programs as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility program. Some of the member companies are involved in energy conservation and development of alternative sources of energy like hydro, wind and solar. The association's employees and the more than 1.5 million constituents are involved in community tree planting, zero waste management and instituting green workplaces. The summit will be a venue to share our best practices, discover better ways of doing things for the environment, and to inspire others.

"We recognize the efforts of those in government, the pioneering efforts of major legislations like the RA 8749, known as the Philippine Clean Air Act of 1999, the Zero Waste Management Act, and their implementation because of the lack of knowledge and consciousness of many of our people and because of the bureaucratic red tape in the government.

Being in the private sector we reiterate our commitment to protect the environment, and affirm our partnership with the government and other sectors of society to do our share in working for a safe, productive, sustainable environment, not only for our generation, but for the generations still to come. This embodies our Summit's theme "Clean Air: Our Life, Our Future," PMAP-HRF said in a statement.

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Toxic gas kills miner

A MINER who inhaled toxic gas inside a mining site died the other day in Bgy. Loacan, Itogon, Benguet.

The Cordillera police said the incident occurred inside a small-scale mining site in the barangay.

Investigators said the victim, Feliciano Oydoc, 44, single, of Sabangan, Mt. Province, together with four companions entered the tunnel at 2 a.m. to conduct mining activities.

However, at 8 a.m. the companions of the victim became worried when he failed to come out. At 10 a.m., they returned to the tunnel and found him unconscious.

They brought the victim out of the tunnel and rushed him to Baguio Medical Center where he was pronounced dead on arrival due to gas poisoning.

Police are investigating the incident to pinpoint responsibility.

Zaida delos Reyes-Palanca & Cesar Reyes

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A worker of the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority collects garbage from the Pasig River in Manila yesterday.

KRIZJOHN ROSALE

DEFINING THE NEWS

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

Govt to allow new coal plants

By Alena Mae S. Flores

ENERGY Secretary Zenaida Monsada said the Philippines cannot unilaterally and immediately stop the development of new coal plants, as proposed by former US vice president Al Gore.

"We still need power... If there will be no coal plants, will the typhoons stop coming, will there be no more flash floods? We need power to fuel the economy," Monsada said.

Gore was in the country early this month to campaign for the Climate Change Reality Project and urged the Philippines to fol-

low the way of the US in putting an end to the development of new coal plants.

Electric generation capacity from coal plants in the US stood at 0.01 percent and oil at 0.07 percent as of 2015, he said.

Monsada said Gore's statement was "offending," given that the Philippines had already commit-

ted to a 70-percent emission reduction by 2030.

"Coal plants are not forever. For now, we need sufficient and reliable power, we need coal," she said.

"But we are preparing for the that. Definitely, we cannot stop coal plants now, but we are imposing stricter standards," she said.

Monsada said the coal plants being built in the country had passed stringent requirements before being issued environmental compliance certificates.

"If the plant operates with ECC, we cannot say stop. For the next ones, that's what we will look at... We have to set the standards...

Coal plants that do not meet the standards, we can close them down," she said.

Monsada said old and existing coal plants also needed to comply with the requirements of the Clean Air Act. "Notwithstanding, we are working for cleaner air. We are working towards achieving our target by 2030," she said.

Monsada said investments in the power generation industry were private sector-driven and electricity prices were reflective of the costs to build the power plants.

"But in other countries, there is cost of externalities. We will look at that with the ERC [Energy Regulatory Commission] for the ad-

ditional energy projects," she said.

Monsada said coal standards included those on emissions, fuel quality and coal handling.

Data from the department showed that as of June 2015, there were 5,800 megawatts of installed capacity of coal-fired power plants across the country's three power grids. The bulk or 4,775.6 MW was in the Luzon grid.

The existing coal plants in Luzon are Pagbilao (764 MW), Calaca (600 MW), Masinloc (630 MW), Sual (1,294 MW), Quezon Power (511 MW), Apec (50 MW), Mariveles (651.6 MW), Petron (140 MW) and South Luzon Thermal Energy Corp. (135 MW).

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Coal power 'affordable,' key is to enforce standards — DoE

By Victor V. Saulon

THE DEPARTMENT of Energy (DoE) is not stopping developers from putting up new coal-fired power plants "for now" because the country needs affordable power to support its economy, but it will be imposing stricter standards to comply with commitments to the international community.

"As of now we need them [coal plants], and if they comply with the standards, *wala kaming magagawa*," Energy Secretary Zenaída Y. Monsada said in a press conference yesterday. "But definitely we cannot stop coal plants now."

She was reacting to a recent call by former US Vice-President Al Gore for action against coal-based power plants in the Philippines, which she described as "offensive" as the country is not a big emitter of greenhouse gas.

"But we are imposing stricter standards," she said, referring to initiatives led by the department and supported by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources to work towards meeting the country's voluntary contribution to the United Nations Framework Convention on

Climate Change to cut emissions by 70% by 2030.

Ms. Monsada said under the law, investments in the energy sector are private sector-driven under the Electric Power Industry Reform Act of 2001. She also said the department has an "aspirational" target to reach an energy mix that calls for the industry to source 30% of its energy needs equally from coal, natural gas and renewable energy, with the rest coming from oil-based resources.

"We aspire to a balanced energy mix because we cannot be overly dependent on one resource especially if that resource is not locally produced," she said.

"We need power to fuel the economy... but we are preparing for that," she said, referring to the eventual reduction of the country's reliance on coal-fired power plants.

As of end-2015, the Department of Energy said the country has a total installed capacity of 18,695 MW and dependable capacity of 16,451 MW. Of the installed capacity, coal-powered plants make up 31.5%, while oil-based and natural gas-fired plants account for 19.3% and 15.3%, respectively.

Renewable energy sources like geothermal, hydro, wind, solar and biomass had a corresponding

share of 10.3%, 19.3%, 2.3%, 0.9% and 1.2%.

In a statement released during the press conference, Ms. Monsada said "the government prioritizes energy security, and [renewable energy] is one of the major contributors to increase the power supply especially that we are also moving towards clean energy technology."

The feed-in tariff (FIT) program is one of the schemes pushed by the department to encourage more renewable energy projects. Under the FIT system, qualified developers are offered a fixed rate per kilowatt-hour (kWh) of their exported electricity to the distribution or transmission network.

The department said subscriptions for renewable energy resources have increased to 806.82 MW from 646.65 MW installations since the start of 2016. It said biomass has 11 power plants with a total capacity of 94.25 MW; hydro has four with 26.60 MW; and wind has six with 393.90 MW.

The DoE said that as of March 15, it had issued certificates of endorsement for FIT eligibility to 11 solar power plants accounting for 292.07 MW. It said more projects may be issued certification once the department had completed its validation and assessment.

"It has to be recalled that the first tranche of the solar for FIT

was at 108.90 MW at P9.68/kWh, while the second tranche was the remainder for the 500 MW installation target at P8.69/kWh," it said.

In the same press conference, she said two "task forces" were working closely to ensure the availability of power two weeks before, during and two weeks after the May 9 national elections.

"We're making sure is that voting centers will have power... that's the number one priority... [They] should not be subjected to rotating brownouts," she said.

She also said that the issue of line congestion in areas such as Negros island was being addressed.

"We have two operational task forces — the Power Task Force Election and the Inter-Agency Task Force on Securing Energy Facilities — in which various national agencies and power stakeholders are conducting preparatory works, maintenance, and monitoring among other tasks just to provide power supply come election period," the department said in a statement issued during the briefing.

"This follows as the government recognizes that the provision of electricity is crucial in striving for clean and unquestionable elections, especially that it is automated," it added.

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Great Barrier Reef coral bleaching worst on record

SYDNEY – Bleaching to Australia's Great Barrier Reef (GBR) is the worst on record with 95 percent of the northern reaches ranked in the two most severe categories.

Human induced climate change has been increasing the frequency of mass coral bleaching events, further strengthened by the El Niño reenforced warm water traveling through the Equatorial Pacific, causing mass bleaching events in Fiji, New Caledonia and Kiribati, among others.

Convenor of the National Coral Bleaching Taskforce and James Cook university professor of coral reef studies Terry Hughes said only four of the 550 reefs surveyed between Cairns and Papua New Guinea in the world heritage listed marine park appeared to be untouched from the mass bleaching event.

"The north has fried," Hughes said.

"The severity is much greater than in earlier bleaching events in 2002 or 1998."

The northern section of the GBR is the most pristine of the reef system, widely used by the Australian authorities to argue against the reef being listed as "in danger" by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Australia is due to report back to UNESCO on its reef management by the end of 2016 to remain off the "in danger" list.

"Even more concerning, we haven't yet found the southern limit of the bleach-

ing," Hughes said, adding further surveys between Cairns and Townsville will be central to identify where it stops.

"Thankfully, the southern Reef has dodged a bullet due to cloudy weather that cooled the water temperatures down."

Australian scientists have stepped up surveying the reef system after bleaching was first noticed in February. They're reporting a 50 percent mortality rate of bleached corals, "but it's still too early to tell just what the overall outcome will be," Hughes said.

Coral reefs are one of the most important and productive marine ecosystems that the world depends on for tourism and fisheries sustainability.

Coral bleaching occurs when stress such as heat caused the animal to expel the symbiotic algae, losing vital nutrients and energy reserves, thus color, leading to

the wide scale loss of productive habitats for fish.

The coral host then becomes weak and susceptible to disease. When bleaching is prolonged, the animal can die.

Recent research suggests corals with high levels of fat or other energy reserves can withstand annual bleaching events, which is critical to predicting the persistence of corals and their capacity to recover from more frequent events resulting from climate change.

Severe bleaching events, however, may take highly impacted coral reefs up to 10 years to recover.

The Great Barrier Reef, the world's largest living ecosystem, spans some 2,000 kilometers along Australia's northeastern coastline, bringing in billions of dollars in tourism revenue each year. (PNA/Xinhua)