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Monday

DENR

IN THE NEWS

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Burning issue: Is PHL prepared for forest fires?

BY JONATHAN L. MAYUGA

ENVIRONMENT authorities are eyeing to declare Mount Apo "off-limits" to mountain climbers, after it caught fire on March 26.

According to initial estimates, around 350 hectares of the forest has been razed by the fire. Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) officials fear that the damage could get worse if the fire continues to spread, the damage of which is expected to leave behind an ugly scar to one of Mindanao's most treasured sacred mountains.

Irresponsible mountain climbers who left their campfire unattended are being blamed for the fire, prompting the DENR to revisit the policy of allowing inexperienced nature trippers to join mountain climbers in their adventures.

Mount Apo, which sits at the heart of the Mount Apo Natural Park (MANP), is one of the most popular climb sites in the Philippines, it being the country's highest peak that is thickly covered with natural forests teeming with wildlife. Even before the fire, protectors of Mount Apo have experienced a serious problem brought by tourists. Tons of garbage were left behind by climbers who irresponsibly discard their waste along the trails.

Since the fire broke out on Saturday, firefighters and volunteers from various parts of the Davao region have rushed to affected areas to help forest rangers contain the fire.

Portions of Mount Apo, however, are still on fire as of Thursday. Fire is pushing toward the Santa Cruz area in Davao del Sur.

The MANP straddles Davao City, Digos City, Santa Cruz and Bansalan in the province of Davao del Sur, and Kidapawan City, Makilala and Magpet in North Cotabato.

Serious forest-protection issue

MOUNT Apo is a key biodiversity area. It is one of the eight Asean Heritage Parks in the Philippines, which represent "the best of the best" protected areas in Southeast Asia. The Philippines has 240 protected areas covering about 5 million hectares of terrestrial and marine areas nationwide.

While over the past five years, the government had succeeded in expanding the country's forest cover by 1.2 million to a total of 8 million hectares as of December 2015, courtesy of the National Greening Program (NGP), some questions linger: Is the country capable of protecting its forest against human threats? More specifically, is it prepared to protect the forests against disastrous forest fires?

Temporary closure

PROTECTED areas are being promoted for ecotourism by the DENR. On Thursday Davao DENR Regional Director Joselin Fraga-da called an emergency meeting among members of the Protected Area Management Board (PAMB) of the MANP to discuss plans on closing Mount Apo to campers.

The emergency meeting was called upon the directive of Environment Secretary Ramon J.P. Paje, who is mulling over the option to declare the MANP off-limits to human activities, particularly mountain climbing, to prevent a repeat of the incident, and to allow Mount Apo to recover from the damage.

Paje wants to put in place measures that will make mountain climbers and campers more responsible and disciplined before being allowed to explore the country's protected areas.

"They [mountain climbers] need to undergo training before being allowed to climb a mountain. Most of those who climb the mountain do not know how to behave. Many are irresponsible and undisciplined," he said.

Paje noted that some of the forest fires that occurred in the past were also triggered by mountain climbers or nature trippers. This includes the fire that caught Mount Banahaw in Luzon in 2014. Forest fires are often caused by human activities.

The PAMB is composed of national and local government officials and representatives of various stakeholders, including private sector, academe and representatives from community-based organizations within a protected area.

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Caught unprepared

APPARENTLY, protectors of Mount Apo were caught unprepared. The fire that broke out from one of the camp sites quickly spread out in just a few hours, immediately affecting 100 hectares of closed canopy forest by Monday morning. As the fire broke out, rescuers focused on evacuating close to 1,000 climbers who were camped around its peak to safer grounds, according to Eduardo Ragaza, the acting protected area superintendent of the MANP.

By the time all the mountain climbers were brought down to safety, the fire is already uncontrollable. With no firefighting equipment—except for bolos and pickax—firefighters and volunteers rushed to create fire lines but the thick smoke made the job difficult, even with the help of a helicopter water bucket deployed by authorities in the area.

"The smoke is too much. It is difficult to conduct even aerial surveillance to identify the affected areas and which areas we need to go first," he said.

Manpower, equipment shortage

ON Thursday Harry Camoro, Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction Management Council head of the province of Davao del Sur, said the erratic wind at the peak of Mount Apo and the brutal terrain made it difficult for firefighters to create fire lines.

With bolos and pickax, around 150 firefighters and volunteers rushed to Santa Cruz area to clear at least 10 meters of the forest, cutting and removing trees, shrubs and grass across the portion of the forest, to which the fire is spreading to.

According to Director Ricardo Calderon of the DENR's Forest Management Bureau (FMB), there are only 2,014 forest rangers all over the country to protect the forests against various threats, including forest fires.

The country has about 15 million hectares of forest, but there is only one forest ranger to take care of 7,000 hectares of forest.

"For every forest ranger assigned to do other task would mean 7,000 hectares of forest will be left unprotected," he said.

The DENR is in the process of hiring more forest rangers, targeting an additional 2,000 within the year as part of the five-year National Forest Protection Program which started in 2013.

Rangers as firefighters

ACCORDING to Calderon, the P500-million-budgeted program started training forest rangers. "This include forest-fire prevention," he said. "Forest rangers were given basic training on how

to deal with forest fires. What to do in case fire breaks out, where to create fire lines based on wind direction, and how to protect themselves during fires," he said.

Communities are, likewise, informed of the dangers of forest fires, Calderon added.

Not a DENR mandate

WHILE forest protection falls within the mandate of the DENR-FMB, firefighting in forests is not within its mandate. Firefighting falls within the mandate of the Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP), an attached agency of the Department of the Interior and Local Government. As such, Calderon said the DENR's FMB is not allowed by law to purchase firefighting equipment.

"Only the [BFP] is allowed to purchase firefighting equipment," he said. "Otherwise, we will have a problem with the COA [Commission on Audit]," he said.

Calderon said during his stint as regional director of the DENR for Central Luzon in 2011, he was able to facilitate the purchase of backpack water sprinklers or sprayers for the training of forest rangers in forest-fire protection. The equipment are normally used by farmers to spray pesticides in farms, including commercial and industrial-tree plantations. But the purchase, he said, is limited to a few units.

To effectively fight forest fire, forest rangers and those at the front lines, including the DENR's partners in forest protection, the Bantay Gubat need to be equipped with firefighting equipment, such as fire swat, which is effective in extinguishing grassfires, backpack water sprinklers, and for big forest fires, a helicopter water bucket.

Not a BFP priority

UNFORTUNATELY, fighting forest fire is not among the BFP's top priority. The BFP, which is mandated to protect lives and properties against deadly fire, is not into buying firefighting equipment for forest fires.

"Our training and equipment are focused on dealing with structural fires [in urban and commercial areas], not for forest fires," Senior Supt. Joselito Cortez of the BFP's Directorate for Operation, told the BUSINESSMIRROR. He said the BFP purchases are for structural fires, such as fire trucks and fire hoses and nozzles.

The BFP, he added, do not have a unit dedicated to fighting forest fire. According to Cortez, the BFP has special rescue units, which the BFP can send out during forest fires, but he said, actual firefighting in the vast forest is not one of those areas the country's firefighters are prepared for.

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"We only coordinate with other agencies during such disasters," he said, referring to local government units [LGUs], which is in charge of disaster risk reduction and management-plan implementation on the ground. Forest fires can last for days, months or even weeks and months as long as there are materials left to burn. This, he said, makes forest fire more dangerous to deal with, underscoring the need to focus on educating the people as a fire-prevention measure.

Deadly, destructive

FOREST fires are destructive and deadly, Calderon said. "In just a few minutes, forest fires can destroy an entire forest, especially during summer and El Niño. Anybody, with no experience in fighting forest fires, can be killed by the smoke alone when trapped in a burning forest," he said.

Forest fires, he said, are usually caused by humans—slash-and-burn farming, unattended bonfires or camp fires, open burning of agricultural waste, or even a lit cigarette butt tossed by a smoker can cause forest fires, Calderon said.

He said fires that start from the peak is expected to spread slower than those start at the foot or middle of the mountain.

"Fire spreads faster during summer because of the dry grass, leaves and branches," he said.

"Once fire broke out, you could not stop it," Calderon said.

He said the best thing firefighters can do is to contain the fire by creating fire lines to prevent it from spreading and affecting other areas. Prevention, according to Calderon, is the only way to keep forests safe from deadly and destructive fire.

Serious threat to biodiversity

DIRECTOR Theresa Mundita Lim of the DENR's BMB said forest fire is a serious threat to the country's protected areas.

Citing University of the Philippines College professor Dr. Edwin Fernando's estimates, Lim said around 70 percent of the country's natural forests are in the country's protected areas.

"Thus, for forest fires to hit our forests within protected areas, it must be taken very seriously. First, forest fires in rain forests are indications of fragmentation. Open areas allow patches to dry up and become easily ignited by heat [particularly during the hot summer months], and this can spread quickly to surrounding areas that are still regenerating," she said.

Lim said the heat from fire and the smoke suffocates the unique plants and animals that cannot immediately move away.

"Some species are adapted to specific elevations and conditions, and are endemic to the mountains, meaning they could be wiped out and become extinct. The opportunity to discover potential value of some of these species, say, for pharmacology or

industrial use, disappears with them," she warned.

"We need to focus our limited resources to protect forests that have been identified as biodiversity-rich. Then leverage this national government investment [for protection], to mobilize additional stakeholder and partner support for enforcement and awareness raising, as well as for sustainable, biodiversity-friendly livelihoods for communities who can help protect the forests against possible sources of fire," she added. Lim said the Mount Apo incident should serve as an eye opener to all PAMBs nationwide.

Mount Apo is home to two nesting pairs of the critically endangered Philippine Eagle, the country's national symbol, and is one of the 240 protected areas that needed to be protected and conserved. Supporting the decision to close all Mount Apo's 11 mountain trails to allow the forest's natural flora and fauna to regenerate naturally, Lim said a plan for a more sustainable, responsible tourism in the area must also be developed.

She said training for communities to be tour guides, who must also be responsible for ensuring that visitors will abide by the rules and regulations of the protected areas, must be observed.

Rehabilitating Mount Apo

CALDERON said rehabilitating Mount Apo's affected areas would take time. He noted that the forest fire might even leave an ugly scar at Mount Apo that will take years to restore. "We will need to consult experts on this to help us plan the rehabilitation," he said.

He said the DENR-FMB will immediately make a postdamage assessment once the fire is put out, and to come up with a plan to restore the beauty of Mount Apo.

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Army troops fight Mt. Apo fire

By Dennis Jay Santos
and Orlando Dinoy
Inquirer Mindanao

DAVAO CITY—Philippine Army soldiers on Saturday climbed Mt. Apo to help volunteers and firemen put out the fire that has been burning sections of the country's highest peak for more than a week now.

The blaze, which started on March 26, had engulfed more than 300 hectares of forest and grassland as of Sunday.

Authorities said some campers may have unwittingly triggered it when they failed to put off fire they used for cooking when they left a camping ground along the Kapatagan trail in Digos City. The fire earlier spread to the North

Cotabato side of Mt. Apo, but this was contained after volunteers built fire lines.

The blaze, however, continues in the Davao del Sur side of the mountain.

Maj. Ezra Balagtey, acting spokesperson of the Philippine Army's Eastern Mindanao Command (Eastmincom), said a company size unit, composed of 112 soldiers from the 10th Infantry Division, arrived in Kapatagan town in Davao del Sur province early morning Saturday and started scaling the mountain. They were expected to reach areas hit by the fire later that day and assist volunteers there.

The soldiers were sent to Mt. Apo a day after Maj. Gen.

Leonardo Guerrero, commander of Eastmincom, alerted all disaster response units to prepare for possible deployment to Mt. Apo to help contain the fire.

Balagtey said the Philippine Air Force has been using a helicopter, rigged with a large bucket, to scoop water from a lake to douse the fire. It is also used to carry sacks of crushed ice that are dropped into affected areas in an attempt to stop the blaze from spreading.

Balagtey said another helicopter is used to ferry volunteers and supplies.

The Regional Disaster Risk Reduction Management Council has appealed for donations of food and water for volunteers.

Harry Camoro, spokesperson

of Incident Management Team in Davao del Sur, said they also needed more volunteers to replace those assigned in the area earlier.

The drop-off areas for donations are the Incident Command Post in Barangay Kapatagan in Digos, Davao del Sur; Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) office in Digos City; and DENR regional office in Lanang, Davao City.

Mt. Apo has an elevation of 2,954 meters above sea level, making it the highest peak in the country. It was declared a natural park in 2004.

Sections of the mountain belong to the provinces of Davao del Sur and North Cotabato.

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2 more Hueys tapped to fight Mt. Apo blaze

**BY VICTOR REYES
AND ANGELA LOPEZ DE LEON**

TWO more Huey helicopters will help contain the forest fire raging in the peak of Mt. Apo since March 26 and a foreign group has expressed interest in helping out.

Air Force spokesman Col. Araus Robert Musico said the two UH-1D helicopters were due in Mt. Apo late yesterday or this morning.

Two Huey helicopters have been sent to the area to help in the firefighting: a UH-1H and a UH-1D.

Musico said the UH-1H "Super Huey" has been dropping water on the fire, using a Bambi bucket and crushed ice donated by a volunteer group. The UH-1D, meanwhile, is more involved in the transport of supplies and logistics for the responders.

He said the UH-1H has so far dumped 50 buckets of water and around 400 kilos of crushed ice since March 29.

He said the two additional UH-1Ds will drop crushed ice and help in the resupply opera-

tion. He added the choppers are not designed for helibucket operations.

He said only one UH-1H Superhuey is using a Bambi bucket because the other one is being maintained.

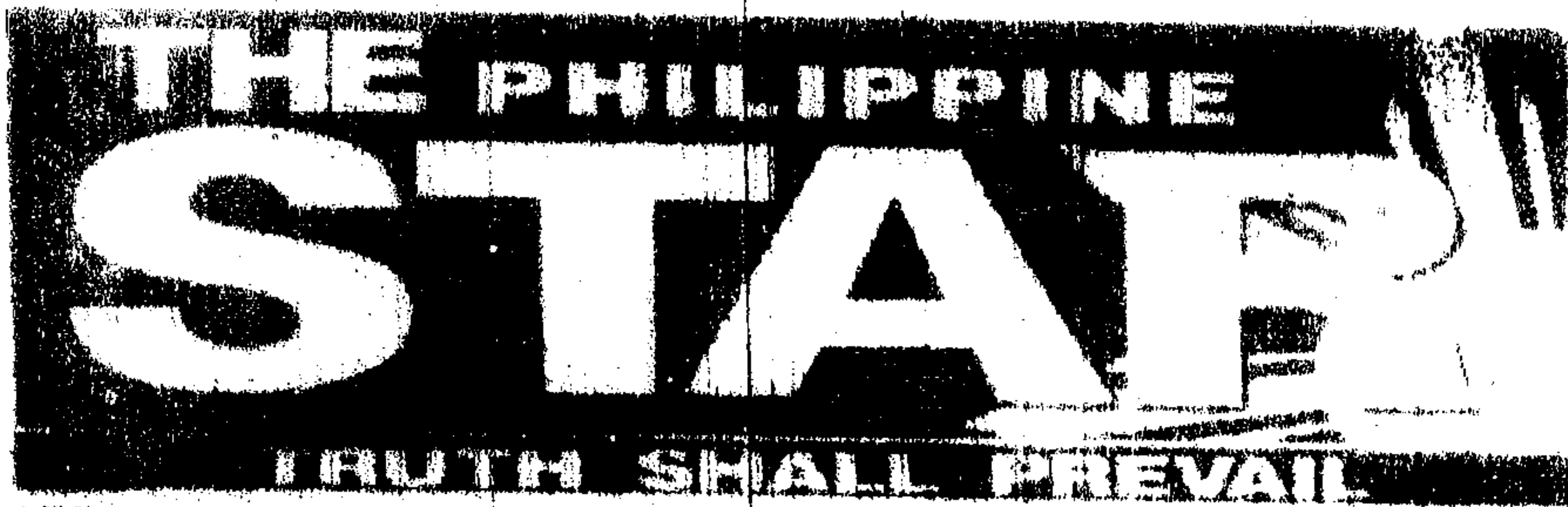
"From what he told me, the aerial firefighting is effective because every time they drop water, the fire is put out," said Musico.

"But the problem is after the operations, especially at night since the Super Huey does not have night capability, the fire starts to spread again. That's why the Air Force is having a difficult time. The fire should be contained with a lot of effort from different sectors," he added.

Davao del Sur provincial disaster risk reduction and management council (PDRPMC) head Harry Camoro said authorities continued to watch three active fires spotted on the Davao del Sur side Saturday evening.

Camoro said the fires are still moving towards the forest area of Sta. Cruz town in Davao del Sur.

He said one fire was observed approximately 300 meters from the centuries-old Almaciga tree, a landmark along the Sibulan Trail in Sta. Cruz.



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400 kilos of ice poured on Mt. Apo fire

By EDITH REGALADO

DAVAO CITY – Instead of water, the Philippine Air Force (PAF) yesterday dropped some 400 kilos of crushed ice to put out the fire that has been raging near the peak of Mt. Apo.

Lt. Col. Jose Ritchie Pabilonia of the PAF said the first experimental operation was conducted after six days of continued forest fire.

Pabilonia could not immediately confirm whether the crushed ice experiment was successful.

"We have yet to confirm the effects of the crushed ice with the volunteers on the ground," he told journalists during a meeting with the provincial disaster management officials in this city.

The PAF's technical operations group 3rd air division has been conducting bambi-bucket operation, using a single Su-

per Huey helicopter in order to put out the blaze.

If effective, Pabilonia plans to drop more crushed ice over the area using a UH1H helicopter.

Liza Mazo, Office of Civil Defense-Region 11 director, said the ice was donated by the Solano and Davao ice plants.

Mazo suggested cloud-seeding to put out the fire.

Meanwhile, the US government will help put out the Mt. Apo blaze.

Philip Dizon, president of the American Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines in Mindanao, told **The STAR** that US Ambassador Philip Goldberg has pledged to help put out the fire.

"The Americans will be sending help on Monday (today)," Dizon posted on his Facebook account yesterday.

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SUPALPAL!



N. NON ALQUITRAN

Raid sa ilegal na minahan ng ginto sa Paracale, moro-moro lang?

SINALAKAY ng mga tauhan ni Sr. Insp. Lester Saygo, ang OIC ng pulisya ng bayan ng Paracale sa Camarines Norte ang small-scale mining sa Bgy. Bulaay noong nakaraang Martes. Kinumpiska ng mga pulis, hindi lang ang mga gamit ng mga minero, kundi maging ang kanilang sakada sa bawa't nahukay na balon. Itong sakada mga kosa ay halos isang sako ng maitim na bato at buhangin na nahukay sa balon na naglalaman ng

ginto. Halos mapuno ang sasakyan ng pulis sa mga gamit, at sakada na dinala sa police station ng Paracale. Ang akala ng taga-Paracale ay may malawakang kampanya itong si Saygo laban sa small-scale mining. Subalit para sa kaalaman ni PNP chief Dir. Gen. Ricardo Marquez, ang naturang raid ni Saygo ay moro-moro lamang. Kasi nga matapos ang ilang oras, ang mga naaresto at mga gamit na kinumpiska ay ibinalik din ng mga pulis sa mga minero matapos nila itong matubos. At hindi lang 'yan! Noong Miyerkules, balik na naman sa kanilang mga balon ang mga minero at tuloy na naman sila sa paghuhukay ng ginto. Lumilitaw mga kosa na itong moro-morong raid ay para lang may maipakita itong si Saygo kay PNP chief Marquez, PRO5 director Chief Supt. Augusto Marquez at Camarines Norte provincial director Sr. Supt. Rodulf Dimas at acting Gov. Jonah Pimentel na accomplishment kapag sinita s'ya, di ba mga kosa? Punyeta! Walang kaibahan itong systema ni Saygo sa "hingi-huli" ng pulisya sa kampanya laban sa pasugalan! Tumpak!

SUPALPAL... Mula page 3

Nang mga bandang alas 2 ng hapon sa araw ding yaon ay pinulong ng bagman na si Hector Honasan ang mga financiers ng ilegal na minahan, kabilang sina Agil Orqueza, Egay Varde, Jun Bermundo at Marcos Lustañas, at kinumpirma n'ya na ang raid ay pang-accomplishment lamang. Ani Honasan, hindi sila puedeng maipasara dahil nakapayola sa kanila, hindi lang itong si PNP chief Marquez, kundi maging ang matataas na episyales ng Camp Crame tulad ni CIDG Dir. Victor Deona at iba pa. Hindi din kikilos itong si Pimentel at kaalyadong bokal Gerry Quiñones sa halagang

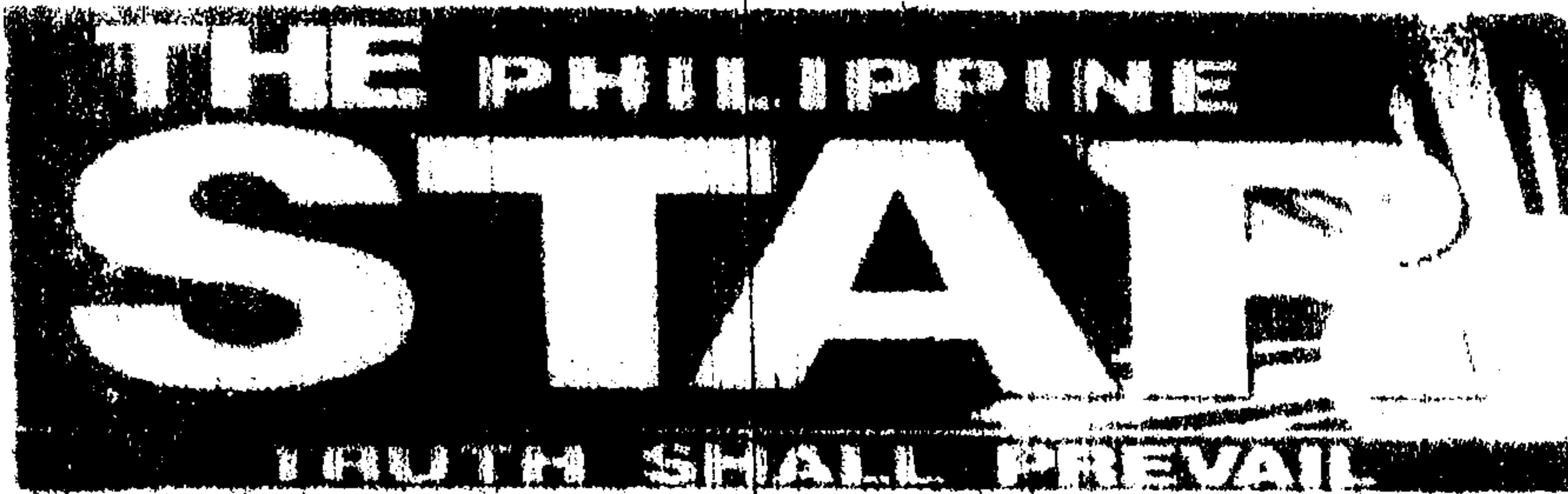
P700,000 weekly, dagdag pa ni Honasan. Ang matindi pa nito, humihingi si Honasan ng P50,000 weekly sa lahat ng operator ng ilegal na minahan ng ginto para sa weekly payola ng LGUs at PNP Kung 70 balon ang kasalukuyang nag-ooperate sa Bgy. Bulaay, aba malaking pera din pala ang nawawala sa mga financiers para pangpayola nila sa LGU at PNP at nang sa ganun ay hindi sila maipasara, di ba mga kosa? Hehehe! Bahala na kayo mga kosa magsuma ng pitsang kini-kita ng PNP, LGU at iba pa sa small scale mining dahil mahina ako sa math talaga. Punyeta!

Babaha ang pitsa sa Camarines Norte bunga sa malaking pitsa ang ipapamugmod nitong sina acting Gov. Pimentel at Bokal Quiñones galing sa small-scale mining, di ba mga kosa? Hehehe! Ang payo ko sa taga-Camarines Norte ay 'wag iboto itong sina Pimentel at Quiñones kapag tinipid sila sa badyet!

Sinabi ng mga kosa ko sa Paracale na ang nakumpiskang sakada ng mga pulis ay kanilang ipinagiling at presto... aabot sa P1 milyon ang lumabas na ginto dito. Ang galeng ni Saygo no mga kosa? Me accomplishment na, may pitsa pa s'ya. "Ika nga, double whammy" ang grasya ni

Saygo sa moro-morong raid na isinagawa n'ya, di ba mga kosa? T'yak hindi naman nila ito ilalatag na ebidensiya sa kunyaring kaso na isasampa nila laban sa mga minero, di ba mga kosa? At dahil tuloy pa din ang operation ng small scale mining, tuloy din ang tulo ng gripo para sa nakasahod na bulsa ni Saygo na aabot sa P100,000 weekly, kasama ang top PNP at LGU officials. Boom Panes! Punyeta! Ang tanong sa ngayon ng mga taga-Bicol, bakit tahimik ang lokal na DENR at Mines at Geoscience Bureau (MGB) sa small-scale mining sa Bgy. Bulaay? May kasagutan ba kayo mga kosa? Abangan!

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MAYNILAD, NWRB HONOR 18 WATER CHAMPIONS: West Zone concessionaire Maynilad Water Services Inc. and the National Water Resources Board recently honored 18 water champions who have made a difference in the area of water access and environmental sustainability during the World Water Day Awards 2016 held recently at Hotel Novotel Manila, Quezon City. The WWD Awards gave recognition this year to the environmental protection efforts of the water districts of Plaridel, Palayan and Bacolod; the city government of Marikina; Dagupan City's Bonoan Boquig Elementary School, and the Land Bank of the Philippines. Maynilad president and CEO Ramoncito S. Fernandez (top left) and National Water Resources Board executive director Sevillo D. David Jr. (3rd from top left) with the World Water Day Awards 2016 awardees.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

A thirsty community in Bukidnon

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By CRISLYN FELISILDA

We often take for granted what we have in abundance. For those of us who conveniently have water when we need it, it may be hard to imagine what it's like for residents of a municipality in Bukidnon.

For many generations in Butong, residents make do with only two sources of water through the spring. They never had water faucets at home. They ration few precious buckets of water for basic needs as bathing, cooking, and washing. Sometimes, residents buy water from neighboring towns at P10 to P20 per container.

"In our place, water is as precious as gold," says sugarcane farmer Reynante Lago.

He typically makes two trips to fetch water every day, sometimes carrying almost 100 liters of water at a time.

Until he could save up for a motorbike two months ago through a loan, getting water



Soon as he arrives from school, eight-year-old Armando fetches water from the spring so the family can have water to drink.

was an ordeal.

"It was very difficult and heavy climbing up and down the steep hill in the dry heat," he recalls. "People here are already used to it. It's our normal routine."

Not just that, the prospect of fetching unsafe water is a threat as it is sourced from a spring

underneath an old balete tree, which can be easily contaminated in the open space. This is why a poster hangs on a nearby tree that warns against throwing garbage, plastic bags, tin cans, etc., or the offender faces a P1,000 fine.

"The risk of getting dirty or contaminated water is very

high that's why it's everybody's responsibility to take care of this source for us to survive," he says.

COSTLY INVESTMENT

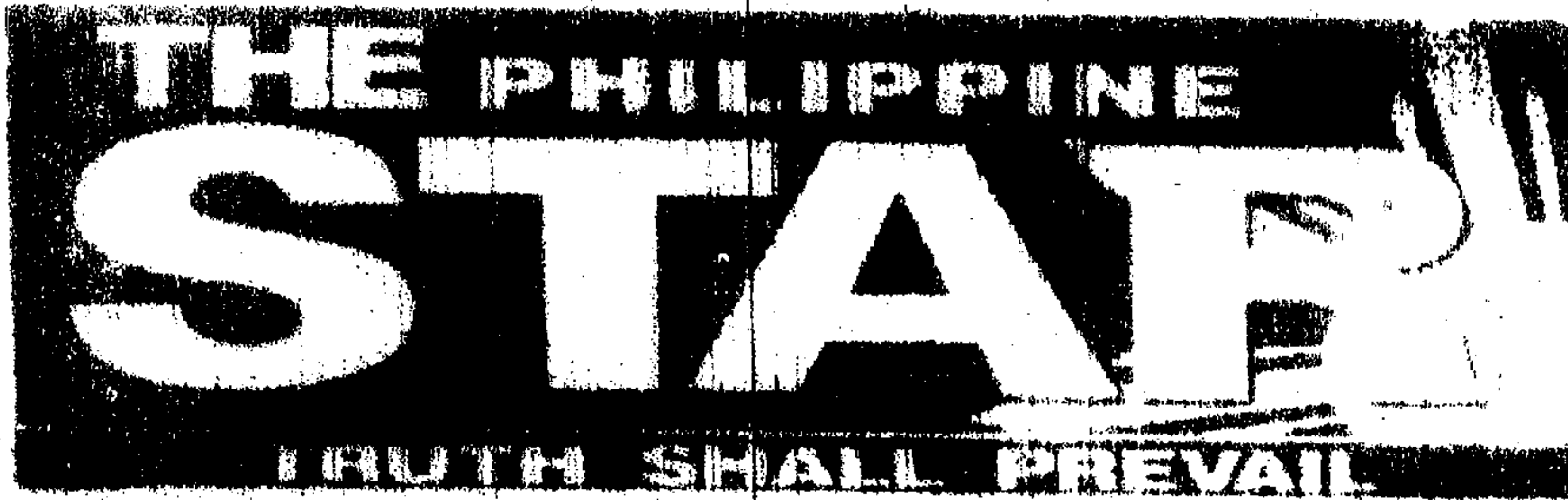
Ironically, Quezon is a first-class municipality in Bukidnon province. Although Pulang River, the longest body of water in Bukidnon, is relatively close to villages with difficult terrain like Butong could not easily access water.

Despite the bounty of spring and abundant water sources in Bukidnon, the drought affecting the entire Mindanao is also taking its toll.

According to the Department of Social Welfare's (DSWD's) National Household Targeting System for Poverty Reduction (NHTS-PR), Bukidnon is one of the provinces in the Philippines that suffer from a scarcity of clean water.

Ground water from the spring may face issues related to environmental degradation and contamination from waste, and

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threats from climate change.

"It's costly to invest water in our area. Yet we've learned that the cost of not ensuring access to drinking water and sanitation is even higher in terms of public health and lost work and school days among our children," says Kagawad Nehru Tan. "We will continue our efforts but we need more resources including people's full participation to realize our goal," he added.

As of this writing, the rural health unit in the barangay did not have enough supply of water. Two or three pregnant women give birth at the health clinic weekly. "Luckily, nobody showed up today, or else we would be in trouble," Tan adds.

The 2014 Millennium Development Goals (MDG) progress report shows that although the country surpassed MDG targets on safe drinking water, approximately 15.7 million Filipinos still lack access.

Worse, while sugarcane in Quezon provides livelihood to many, other issues have sur-

faced. Farmers or laborers earn only small salaries and incur enormous debts. Most of them work as laborers in haciendas for P200 per day.

World Vision has just embarked on a partnership with the local government in Quezon Bukidnon and the people themselves to solve major issues in the community like scarcity of water, child labor, and poverty in general.

"Community-led approaches to water supply and sanitation can bring long-lasting benefits to remote villages like Butong," Veronica Macabudbod, World Vision program officer, says. "We will extend our support in advocating to our communities that they should be responsible in managing ongoing efforts to provide easy access to clean water."

For Reynante Lago, a faucet at home would go a long way in ensuring his family's health.

"I hope politicians will make [it] a priority. If that happens, my dream will be finally be fulfilled."

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Albay idineklarang UNESCO Biosphere Reserve

Idineklara ng United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) ang Albay bilang Biosphere Reserve, kasama ang 257,000 hektarya nitong 'terrestrial and marine ecology' na protektado ng mga 'pioneering and planned sustainable development strategies'.

Isa ang Albay sa 669 Biosphere Reserves sa mundo na matatagpuan sa 120 bansa. Isa na rin itong natatanging lugar na maaaring pag-aralan ang tungkol sa 'sustainable development' at 'biodiversity conservation' para mapangalagaan ang likas na kapaligiran. Kasama ito sa 20 bagong 'protected World Network of biospheres'

na itinanghal ng UNESCO sa kumperensiya ng "international coordinating council of Man and the Biosphere (MAB) program' nito sa Lima, Peru nitong Marso 18. Ayon kay Albay Gov. Joey Salceda na nagsikap para mabuslo ng lalawigan ang deklarasyon ng UNESCO, kuwalipina

kado na ang Albay sa pondong tulong mula sa mga international funding agencies, kasama na ang Green Climate Fund (GCF) ng United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change na pinamunuan niya bilang co-chairman at mahihirap na bansa.

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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

Leyte coastal waters declared free of red tide toxins

By ELLALYN B. DE VERA

The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) has declared the coastal waters of Leyte now free of red tide toxin.

However, BFAR Director Asis Perez continues to warn the public from eating shellfish that were caught in certain parts of the provinces of Western Samar, Biliran, and Capiz as the coastal waters in these areas remain positive for the toxin.

Perez said the latest laboratory results conducted by BFAR and local government units on shellfish collected in the coastal waters of Daram Island in Daram and Cambatutay Bay in Western Samar, the coastal waters of Naval in Biliran, and those in Pilar in Capiz "are still positive for paralytic shellfish poison beyond the regulatory limit."

He advised the public that all types of shellfish and *Acetes* sp. or *alamang* gathered from these areas are not safe for human consumption.

"Fish, squids, shrimps, and crabs are safe for human consumption provided that they are fresh and washed thoroughly, and internal organs, such as gills and intestines are removed before cooking," Perez said.

Meanwhile, the following areas continue to be free from toxic red tide, that is, the coastal waters of Cavite, Las Piñas, Parañaque,

Navotas, Bulacan, and Bataan in Manila Bay, as well as the coastal waters of Bolinao, Anda, Alaminos, Sual and Wawa in Bani, Pangasinan, Masinloc Bay in Zambales, coastal waters of Milagros and Mandaon in Masbate, Juag Lagoon in Matnog and Sorsogon Bay in Sorsogon, and Honda and Puerto Bays in Puerto Princesa City and Inner Malampaya Sound in Taytay, Palawan.

The coastal waters of Panay, President Roxas, Roxas City in Capiz and Sapián Bay (Ivisan and Sapián in Capiz, Mambuquio and Camansi in Batán Aklan), coastal waters of Altavas, Batán and New Washington in Batán Bay, Aklan, coastal waters of E.B. Magalona, Pontevedra, Pulpandan, Valladolid, Talisay City, Silay City, Bacolod City, Hinigaran, Cadiz City, Victorias City, Bago City, Binalbagan and San Enrique in Negros Occidental, coastal waters of Dauis in Bohol, Maqueda, Irong-irong and Villareal Bays in Western Samar, Matarinao Bay in Eastern Samar, and San Pedro, Carigara and Cancabato Bays in Leyte are also free from toxins.

Also red tide-free are the coastal waters of Dumanquillas Bay in Zamboanga del Sur, Tantanang Bay in Zamboanga Sibugay, Murcielagos Bay in Zamboanga del Norte and Misamis Occidental, Hinatuan, Bislig and Lianga Bays in Surigao del Sur, and Taguines Lagoon in Benoni Mahinog, Camiguin Island.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

Pfizer supports young scientists to save environment

By JANINE RAE ULIT

Mention the word Anilao and what immediately comes to mind is the popular scuba diving destination in Batangas just a few hours south of Metro Manila. However, there is also a place by the same name in Iloilo, in the beautiful island of Panay, which similarly shares a wealth of natural marine resources being just along the coastline of the Visayan Sea.

And like many nature-rich locations within the Philippine archipelago, Anilao in Iloilo is also experiencing its own share of threats. Apart from the effects of man-made developments such as pollution, the marine ecosystem is also fighting a battle against the ravages of strong calamities. The situation is particularly more pressing because the local residents mainly depend on the marine resources for actual livelihood such as fishing.

Senior high school students Angelo Rafael Nacionales, Centel Joy Japitana and Paulino Salmon III learned about this while pondering possible topics for their research project at the Philippine Science High School-Western Visayas Campus (PSHSWVC) in 2014.

"Anilao is an LGU whose officials have been very supportive to studies conducted in their coastal waters, particularly Banate Bay," says Angelo of the coastal community, which is around 30 to 45 minutes from Jaro in Iloilo City where their school, popularly known as "Pisay," is based.

The bay has been under constant monitoring since its decline in the 1990s, and numerous restoration efforts have already been undertaken. "We learned from our interview with a government official that there was a growing concern about the seagrass resources in particular. Seagrasses were uprooted and washed out to shore as a result of strong currents caused by Typhoon Yolanda," Angelo says.

Seagrasses, along with mangroves and coral reefs, are vital components of a marine ecosystem, and any damage to these resources may halt the progress of decades of restoration in the bay. The group of friends therefore took upon themselves the necessary task of auditing the seagrass beds in the seagrass reserve of Banate Bay as

their school research study.

Encouraging young thinkers

It was quite a tall task for the 16-year-olds, but they were undaunted. First of all, they were fortunate enough to secure funding assistance from the prestigious Youth Science Research Program (YSRP) supported by the Pfizer Philippines Foundation Inc. at PSHSWVC.

Their pitch won the grant because it fit the objective of YSRP to support research studies that tackle issues and challenges that benefit local communities—from environmental protection and livelihood to health and nutrition.

The young Pisay scientists have also come to consider the grant as a recognition in itself, having been a flagship research program of the school for more than a decade now. The program started in 2005 under the leadership of then campus director Josette Biyo, herself an accomplished science and education researcher.

The YSRP was started with the objective of encouraging and supporting students to explore the demanding, yet rewarding field of scientific research even at an early age—hopefully creating new generations of scientists, doctors, and specialists in the medical and research field.

"The YSRP has become an educational legacy and an integral part of our learning process here in Pisay," said PSHSWVC director Shena Faith Ganela. "We are very grateful and fortunate for programs such as these that strengthen our ties with the private sector through their support, and at the same time enable us to impart more opportunities and learnings to our students."

Bonding with the community

Angelo, Joy and Paul quickly buckled down to work. "Doing field work was a very memorable and humbling experience," said Angelo. Their study required them to conduct two-day field work at least once a month within a vast 32-hectare area of Banate Bay. The site contained smaller sites or quadrats, and nine of these were randomly chosen during each visit.

The group's tasks included utilizing GPS equipment, counting shoots



More than just conducting research for their school study, the "Pisay" students learned a lot interacting with the local fishermen and understanding their dependence on the local marine ecosystem

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Pfizer supports
young scientists
for marine environ-
ment



Philippine Science High School–Western Visayas students Paulino Salmon, Angelo Nacionales and Centel Japitana quantify the population of seagrasses in Banate Bay, Anilao, Iloilo

of seagrass, setting up quadrats or plots, tabulating, taking photos, and checking water quality.

The site, located three kilometers from the shore, could be accessed by walking during low tide. However, there were times when they had to wake up at three in the morning for a 10- to 15-minute boat ride to the site during high tide.

"We would eat breakfast and drink coffee on the boat," recounts Angelo fondly. "We would then wait until five a.m. or until the water level is manageable and we would start doing the survey. We would tow the boat from one quadrant to the next."

Their work also brought them a different kind of memorable experience bonding with the residents of the community. "We were embraced by hospitable locals who opened their homes to us, and we grew accustomed to the way of life of fisher folks who assisted us in our study," Angelo says.

Awareness and preservation

At the end of the six-month onsite research, the group happily reported that the seagrasses were growing in patches and were narrowly disturbed. Continuous and long-term monitoring of the seagrass reserve

area was recommended to further ensure a stable future for the reserve as well as the locals who depended on it.

For the three, the experience turned out to be more than just school work. It was enriching and life-changing, knowing that their research may have a positive impact on the lives of the residents.

Now a freshman at the University of the Philippines–Diliman studying industrial engineering, Angelo says that teaching Filipino children to appreciate science and innovation is important, and with institutions such as Pisay and organizations like the Pfizer Philippines Foundation supporting this cause, the future looks bright for young researchers like them. "Pisay's research program puts emphasis not only on the improvement of our research abilities but also to the development of character and life skills," he explains.

"It's the intangibles that come with the grant that really helped us research students. To be a research grantee boosted our morale and allowed us to show our peers and our teachers our capabilities as scientific researchers," he says.

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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE

IP rights group dares bets to fight big dams

By Nestor P. Burgos Jr.
Inquirer Visayas

ILOILO CITY—Indigenous peoples groups and advocates have challenged presidential candidates to voice their opposition against large-scale dam projects, which they said have dislocated or threatened tribal communities in the country.

"We have yet to hear a presidential candidate speaking against megadams and on defending the rights of indigenous peoples," Joan Jaime, research and documentation officer of Katribu Kalipunan ng Katutubong Mamamayan ng Pilipinas, told the *INQUIRER* last week on the sidelines of a national forum on dams and ancestral domains.

The forum was attended by leaders and representatives of indigenous peoples' groups whose communities host dams or have been identified as sites of proposed dam projects.

Jaime said these projects would dislocate thousands of indigenous peoples, whose farms and communities would be submerged once these are completed.

These tribal communities are in Nueva Vizcaya province (Diduyon Dam project), Rizal and Quezon provinces (New Centennial Water Dam project), Tarlac province (Balog Balog Bam), Bukidnon province (Pulangi V Dam), Iloilo province (Jalaur River Multi-Purpose Project II or JRMP II) and Capiz province

(Panay River Basin Integrated Development Project).

Proponents of megadam projects have cited the need for improved irrigation systems, generation of hydroelectric power, and domestic and industrial water and flood control to push for the projects.

In Iloilo, the JRMP II seeks to develop and enhance year-round irrigation systems to 32,000 hectares of farmlands, generate hydroelectric power and provide domestic and industrial water supply.

The project involves the construction of three dams (Jalaur reservoir, afterbay and catch dams), a 6.6-megawatt hydropower plant and an 81-kilometer highline canal.

But Jaime said the projects have resulted in the loss of land

and livelihood of indigenous peoples' communities. She said relocation areas provided by the government have not addressed the dislocation because these were far from ancestral lands and farms.

The projects have also disrupted or destroyed cultural practices of the communities, including communal fishing, which is a traditional ritual for several indigenous peoples groups.

John Warner Carag, a biologist and member of Advocates of Science and Technology of the People, said while the Philippine government is pushing the construction of large dams (structures that are more than 15 meters tall, based on international standards), other countries prefer the building of several small dams to service communities.

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MT. PINATUBO

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Fees at Mt. Pinatubo crater-lake stir protest

By Tonette Orejas
and Allan Macatuno
Inquirer Central Luzon

CITY OF SAN FERNANDO—
The Botolan government in
Zambales province has started
collecting P700 from each
tourist trekking to the
Mt. Pinatubo crater via Capas
town in Tarlac province.

Tour operators serving
tourists who visit the world-fa-
mous crater-lake said a Botolan
council resolution, which im-
poses the fee, will weaken or
kill local tourism.

"It is the height of summer
and it is also the peak of book-
ings to the Mt. Pinatubo
crater. This ordinance will ad-
versely affect bookings, most
of which are pre-booked, op-
erations as well as possible in-
come for guides and 4 x 4 ve-
hicle drivers," said Poch
Jorolan, a trek operator, in an
e-mailed statement last
week.

The resolution was approved
in a special session of the
Botolan council on March 18. It
requires tourists to pay a
P100-eco-tourism fee, a
P350-environmental protection
fee and a P250-ancestral do-
main preservation fee. It sets a
fine of P2,000 for trekkers who
refuse to pay these fees.

Tourists entering Barangay
Santa Juliana in Capas pay a
separate P450-fee, from where
P100 is reserved for Aetas of
Zambales and P50 for Aetas of
Tarlac.

Treks

Guided treks by Aetas have
been lucrative enterprises since
these began in 1998.

Botolan Mayor Doris
Maniquiz-Jeresano said her
town was asserting its rights,
adding the Mt. Pinatubo crater
was within the jurisdiction of
Botolan.

"Everyone knows that Mt.
Pinatubo is part of Botolan. It's
our municipality that must
generate income from it," she
told the INQUIRER by tele-
phone.

Faced with protests following
a dry run on March 22, Jeresano
had suspended the collection of
the P700 until March 31, ac-
cording to Jorolan.

Another resolution, which
was approved in a special ses-
sion of the Botolan council on
March 18, authorizes Jeresano
to enter into a memorandum of
agreement with the Aeta vil-
lages of Villar Moraza, Burgos
and Belbel and Mt. Pinatubo
Ancestral Domain Association
(MPADA) for a joint manage-
ment agreement (JMA) of the
Mt. Pinatubo ancestral do-
main.

But many believe the resolu-
tions may not be enforceable
because the setting of fees, as
well as the formalization of a
JMA, must be covered by an or-
dinance.

"As a tourism stakeholder, I

find this ordinance and such
collection midway along the
trail as illegal as it was allegedly
passed without public hearing
and consultations. It was imple-
mented allegedly without the
approval of the Sangguniang
Panlalawigan of Zambales. And
this is in total disregard of the
rights of the Aetas who are the
owners of the ancestral do-
main," Jorolan said.

Chito Balintay, MPADA head,
said more community consulta-
tions were needed. He went to
the Central Luzon office of the
National Commission on In-
digenous Peoples (NCIP) here
to seek help in resolving the is-
sue.

"We want more reasonable
fees. We don't want to scare
away tourists. We want maxi-
mum benefits for our mem-
bers," Balintay said.

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Consultation

No public consultation was held before the fees were imposed, according to Carlito Domulot, one of the leaders of Lubos na Alyansa ng mga Katutubong Ayta.

"I hope this issue won't divide us. I hope our customary laws would prevail," Domulot said.

The volcano and the bean-shaped, 3-kilometer-wide crater-lake are part of the Aeta domain, according to a certificate of ancestral domain title issued by the NCIP in November 2009. The area spans 15,998 hectares in four Botolan villages and portions of Cabangan, San Felipe and San Marcelino towns, all in Zambales.

Capas Mayor Antonio Rodriguez has invited Jeresano to a dialogue to reach a win-win solution. "We are willing to collect the fees for them—sort of running a one-stop shop so as not to inconvenience tourists," he said.

Tourism income

Jeresano said she had to make a "drastic move," claiming that Rodriguez had been ignoring since 2014 her requests to allow Botolan generate income from the tourism activities in the crater.

"We will provide official receipts for all of these fees. The officials of Capas don't have to approve that because the crater is our territory," she said.

Jorolan said the Botolan local government should train guides and drivers before they are deployed.

"Botolan wants the business but it does not have safe and easy access for tourists. Because from Pampanga, tourists will have to travel an extra two hours to reach the town," he said.

"If this will not be resolved, I would rather have the trekking suspended indefinitely than give in to the additional fees and demands of Botolan," he said.