Sibuyan Island: PEOPLE’S RESISTANCE TO PLUNDER ENDS IN DEATH

By RODNE GALICHA

IT STARTED as a peaceful picket of anti-mining advocates in Sitio Olango, Brgy. España, San Fernando, Sibuyan Island. But by mid-morning of October 3, 2007, an environmentalist town councilor was gunned down by an employee of Sibuyan Nickel Properties Development Corporation (SNPDC).

Martyred advocate

Councilor Armin R. Marin, 42, was shot in the head by Mario Kingo in front of hundreds of anti-mining picketers at 10:30 AM. Marin died while he was being rushed to the hospital.

He is the 23rd environmental activist to be killed under the Arroyo administration. The October 3 picket was in opposition to the mining activities being set by Filipinas Top Rock Mines and to the off-take agreement of BHP Billiton with SNPDC and Pelican Resources Ltd of Australia. The picketers were also protesting the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, which had approved the cutting of 69,709 trees in the area. It was during the negotiations, between the picketers and representatives of the mining company, when several witnesses saw Kingo with a gun.

The perpetrator fled from the crime scene with the help of security guards employed by the mining firm. The following day, he turned himself in at the provincial office of the Philippine National Police. Another suspect, Lea Ladica, was released by the police. According to eyewitnesses, Ladica, the information officer of SNPDC, was also armed during the picket. (Analysis showed that two shots were fired from the .38 caliber used by Kingo. Witnesses however say that they heard three gunshots.) Marin had been a staunch anti-mining advocate even before he was elected councilor. He was a member of Sibuyan Aton Manggad (SAM), which is now the Sibuyan Island Sentinels League for the Environment (Sibuyan ISLE) Inc., and the Sibuyanons Against Mining movement, an affiliate of the national anti-mining alliance Alyansa Tigil Mina (ATM). He constantly opposed mining operations and applications in Sibuyan Island. His death is a big blow to the environmental movement in Sibuyan Island.
Sibuyan. But it will not scare the anti-mining advocates in the island. In fact, his death has only strengthened the people’s resolve to keep the island of Sibuyan from the rapacity of large-scale mining firms.

“We will not give up,” vowed one of the anti-mining leaders, Benhur Macato. According to Macato, a retired army major, “somebody had already shed blood. We must not fail Armin; he is a martyr and hero.”

Bishop Jose Corazon Talac of the Diocese of Romblon, in exhorting the people to stand fast on their advocacy, said that “The cry of the blood of our brother (Armin) is calling us to pray fervently that no further death and injuries happen as we continue the struggle for the betterment of our people.”

Marin’s death has not been for naught. For one, the media attention that resulted from the killing has brought national and even international attention to the anti-mining struggle in Sibuyan. At least two senators expressed concern over the killing. Sen. Loren Legarda has expressed support for the suspension of mining activities in Sibuyan, and Sen. Francis Pangilinan condemned what he called a “brazen and treacherous act.”

The DENR, for its part, suspended the cutting of trees in the island. The special permit to cut trees was approved by then-Secretary Angelo Reyes on July 27, 2007, shortly before he was transferred to the Department of Energy. The DENR however said it cannot cancel the special cutting permit.

**Popular opposition**

Mining in Sibuyan Island has always been opposed by the majority of its inhabitants.

On September 2, 2006, an island-wide caravan rally was held to protest the start of the drilling and exploration activities in Brugs. Taclob and España. The drilling/exploration had been approved by the provincial government, through small-scale mining permits issued to Philippine, Canadian and Australian large-scale mining companies. Some 8,000 anti-mining advocates from Sibuyan’s three municipalities (San Fernando, Magdiwang and Cajidiocan), as well as advocates from Romblon and neighboring provinces, marched to the mining sites in the said barangays to express their opposition to the destruction and pollution of their small island.

Opposition to mining is not only confined among the residents of Sibuyan, but also by those who are already overseas-based. The board of directors of the Chicago, USA based Romblon Discussion List – Cultural, Livelihood and Educational Assistance for Romblon (RDL-CLEAR) recently voted to support SAM’s campaign to have local and national officials declare a mining moratorium in the island.

RDL-CLEAR’s Honolulu-based president, Nic Musico, who is an environmentalist and a human rights advocate, says “Sibuyan is a very unique island because of its biodiversity. It should be protected from destructive commercial operations like medium/large scale mining and large-scale logging. Local officials and President Arroyo should consider the long-term effects of their decisions on the environment and livelihood of the people of Sibuyan.”

More anti-mining rallies were held in the island, including the caravan on March 11, 2007, which was participated in by more than 2,000 advocates. On June 9, 2007, some 3,000 people gathered to oppose the iron mining operations of JKL Brothers Mineral Ore Quarrying Enterprises in Brgy. Mabini, San Fernando. JKL is operating in partnership with Ore Asia Mining Development Corporation. Its area of operation extends over 3.36 hectares, for a period of two years. Environmentalists are particularly incensed that while its permit is for small-scale mining, JKL has been using heavy equipment in its mining operations in clear violation of the law.

**Nickel-rich island**

Sibuyan has an inferred nickel resource of 7.26 million tons. This sizable nickel reserve has naturally attracted a number of multinational mining companies.
Canadian Altai Resources ‘owns’ the site through its own Altai-Philippines. The Australian Pelican Resources, through its Sunshine Gold Pty. Ltd., with Sun-Pacific Resources and All-Acacia Resources (now SNPDC), both through their local subsidiaries, were granted two Small-Scale Mining Permits effective for two (2) years. These mining operations are all in Brgy. Taclob, San Fernando. The permit for All-Acacia covers 200,000 square meters, while the permit for Sun-Pacific covers 155,800 square meters. These permits allow the companies to extract 50,000 metric tons of nickel ore per year, or a total of 200,000 metric tons for two operations. These are, in effect, large-scale operations disguised as small-scale mining.

To date, there are three approved small-scale mining operations (with foreign financiers), two pending mineral productions agreement (MPSA) applications in four areas, one pending exploration permit (EP) application in the municipalities of Cajidiocan and Magdiwang, and two pending mining pier construction projects in San Fernando. A total of 13 plotted mining areas all over the island are open for application.

On August 7, 2007, an organization called Forward Romblon (FOROM) and Romblon Chamber of Commerce and Industry (RCCI) sponsored a forum in San Fernando. It was

August 7, 2007 protest in Sibuyan
Photos: Sibuyan ISLE, Inc.

Spikes spread on the roads by pro-mining supporters intended to harm the March 11 anti-mining march. ostensibly held “to help clarify the issue of mining.” However, the forum was a blatant pitch for mining companies.

During the forum, Mayor Nanette Tansingco announced that she will sign mining business permits anytime, because the documents are already complete. Her words are a complete turnaround from her July 4, 2007 assurance that she “will never be pro-mining.”

Because the anti-mining advocates were not given a chance to present their perspective, people walked out from the forum.

Sibuyanons are particularly concerned over the continued opening up of their island to more mining operations.

Recently, SR Metals, Inc. (owned by a certain Alberto Gutierrez and former Caloocan congressman Edgar Erice) conducted site visits in Brgy. España. España strongly registered their opposition to the impending mining operation. Some of those who are actively opposed to mining have already experienced some forms of harassment and strong-arm tactics. For instance, the barangay treasurer of Brgy. España was unceremoniously removed from his job. His wife, also an anti-mining advocate, was fired from her job in the local day-care center. Another leader of the anti-mining movement in the barangay is unjustly facing charges of direct assault. (Sibuyanons, however, are relieved that SR Metals has been recently ordered by the Court of Appeals to stop operating in Tubay.)

On September 3, 2007, another application for exploration was published. The applicant, Rommel Ibuna, wants to explore nickel, iron, chromite and other associated minerals in seven barangays of the municipalities of Magdiwang and Cajidiocan in the province of Romblon. The total area applied covers 1,339.9 hectares. Mayor Ibarra Manzala concurred with the resolution of the Sangguniang Bayan of Magdiwang (led by Vice Mayor Denisia Repiso) rejecting Ibuna’s application. The four barangays affected likewise passed resolutions rejecting the project. In Cajidiocan, during the incumbency of Mayor Athena Malapitan, a resolution rejecting the project was approved by the Sangguniang Bayan under then-Vice Mayor Nicasio Ramos (currently sitting as mayor).

The struggle against the pillage of Sibuyan Island continues, despite the aggressive promotion of mining by the Arroyo administration. As long as the residents and other environmental advocates stay firm on their vision of a Sibuyan free from the clutches of large-scale mining companies, so will the Sibuyanons continue to have an island they call home.

*RODNE GALICHA is the coordinator of Sibuyan ISLE, Inc.

ENDNOTE
1/ Identified as president of the company is Jose Miguel Cabarrus.