In its bid to lure top foreign investors to the country’s mining industry, the Arroyo government and the Chamber of Mines hosted the 7th Asia-Pacific Mining Conference on June 5-7 at the Makati Shangri-la Hotel.

This high profile event was also organized by the ASEAN Federation of Mining Associations (AFMA), whose current chair Benjamin Philip Romualdez is also the president of the Chamber of Mines of the Philippines. AFMA members were also the main delegates to the conference.

On June 4-8, local anti-mining activists led by Alyansa Tigil Mina (ATM, Alliance to Stop Mining) and Defend Patrimony (DP) staged protest activities during the holding of the regional mining summit to oppose the government’s ‘wholesale auction’ of the country’s sovereignty, environment and natural resources.

The protesters called for a moratorium on large-scale mining. In the experience of communities that have hosted mining operations, large-scale mining brought massive environmental degradation, health risks, human rights violations, and incursions into ancestral domains of indigenous Filipinos.

They were also demanding the repeal of the 1995 Philippine Mining Act because it violates constitutional provisions on patrimony. The Mining Act allows full foreign ownership of local mining ventures through the Financial or Technical Assistance Agreement (FTAA) scheme.

The feast

The week began with a joint Alyansa Tigil Mina and Defend Patrimony press conference. The nation’s two major anti-mining groups had always been allies in the campaign, but were now presenting a more unified program of action in light of the government’s own aggressive policy push.

The bishop of Caloocan City, Deogracias Iñiguez, presented the position of the Catholic Church on mining. The bishop has long championed the cause of environmentalism, having been the bishop of the diocese of Iba, covering Zambales province, which is the site of some hard-fought environmental and ancestral rights battles.

Also in attendance was Vice Mayor Luis Castillet of Victoria town in Oriental Mindoro, who was elected to the position with the help of the Alyansa Laban sa Mina (ALAMIN), ATM’s local partner in the said province. ALAMIN utilized its grassroots power during the local elections in May to counter the support of mining company Crew Minerals to pro-mining candidates. Mindoro’s anti-mining resistance is one of the strongest in the country and has delivered setback after setback to the operations of Crew Minerals Corporation, such that after more than a decade in Mindoro, Crew Minerals is still in the exploratory stage.

The highlight of the press conference was billed as “pagpiyesta ng mga minero sa Pilipinas.” It called attention to the government’s pro-mining drive which covers all parts of the country, sparing not even the pristine wilds of Palawan. Volunteers wearing skull masks and hard hats pointed out on a map the mining areas being opened across the nation. The skull motif frequently appears in ATM events, because local communities see mining as a deadly enemy that will snuff out the life from their lands.

Greeting the AFMA delegates

On the morning of June 5, ATM and DP took positions at the Ayala Center grounds. ATM’s main mass of streamers and flags were placed at the corner of the 6750 Building. DP and Bayan Muna were in their own positions near the Landmark, forcing the security forces of Shangri-La Makati to split their guards to contain the protesters.

Being the country’s financial hub, Ayala District always has predictable schedule as business activities jump through its accustomed hoops day after day, but the rally disrupted that flow. Office workers got an eyeful of the anti-mining spectacle as ATM and DP hoisted high their banners and their black umbrellas spray
The Tragedy in Siocon

Since 1997, when TVI, a Canadian mining company, acquired mining rights to 486 hectares in Mt. Canatuan in Siocon, residents of this small municipality have seen the degradation of their environment and the loss of their livelihood.

The Subanons, who regards Mt. Canatuan as a sacred site, have been removed from their land and have been deprived of their source of livelihood.

Over the years, ATM had documented human rights violations perpetrated against the Subanons by TVI, through its private security forces. Several Subanons families have lost their homes, which were demolished by the mining company at night. Their peaceful mobilizations had been met with violent dispersals. Those who oppose the destruction of their sacred mountain had suffered various forms of intimidation and harassment.

The Subanons’ right to self-determination was trampled on by TVI, when it manipulated local organizations to obtain consent for the mining operations. TVI’s private security force – trained by the military – intimidates and imposes limitations on the Subanons’ freedom of movement and restricts even their access to food and health services. As in other areas of the country, anti-mining residents are treated as “annoyances” that should be silenced and subdued by military force.

The continuing struggle and suffering of the Subanons and other residents of Siocon have been spotlighted in recent days, when reports came out that the sulphide dam of TVI collapsed on July 11, 2007, following heavy rainfall. This is the second time the dam collapsed. The first reportedly happened in April 2 this year.

Week’s end

On the last day of the week-long activity, ATM partners gave radio interviews. Bernardo Larin of the Philippine Human Rights Information Center (PhilRights) and Annabelle Plantilla of Haribon spoke on the human rights and environmental costs of large-scale mining in contrast to the investment and development being promised by the government and the private companies.

Meanwhile, Kontra Mina again took to the streets of Makati, this time to picket the embassies of Canada and Australia. These two countries are home to a number of big mining firms operating in the Philippines. Leaflets were distributed and once more, volunteers in skull masks roamed the streets to drive home the point that for many people in the communities, mining is not an opportunity but a deadly threat to their way of life.

ENDNOTES

1 Romualdez is the nephew of former First Lady Imelda Marcos.

2 ATM is composed of NGOs, POs, church-based groups and academic institutions that have banded together “to challenge the aggressive promotion of large-scale mining in the Philippines.” Both an advocacy group and a people’s movement, ATM works to protect communities and natural resources threatened by large-scale mining.