



## Ex-execs seek DENR probe of damages by Rapu-Rapu mine

By Manly Ugalde - AUGUST 13, 2016

LEGAZPI CITY—A former mining executive of the South Korean-owned Rapu-Rapu Mining consortium in Albay has asked President Duterte to order a probe and study the abandoned town of Rapu-Rapu, after it was mined out of minerals that generated a whooping income of P65 billion in five years and left with a measly P158 million in rehabilitation fund.

Among the minerals mined on the tiny island were gold, copper, zinc and bronze in a 186-hectare land, where two disastrous cyanide spills dumped mine tailings to coastal villages, resulting to heavy fish kills in Rapu-Rapu and neighboring coastal communities of Sorsogon province.

Cecille A. Calleja, communication executive of South Korean-owned Rapu-Rapu Mines, was one of four complainants in the environmental case filed against four top officials of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), the four companies under the Rapu-Rapu Mines consortium and 10 of their executives.

The residents of Rapu-Rapu town are dependent on fishing and are still waiting for the “huge” amount the South Korean mines executives promised under the Final Mines Rehabilitation Decommissioning Plan.

In a long-distance interview, Calleja—on vacation in the US—asked President Duterte to order an investigation on how the South Korean firm’s last shipment of ore in 2013, worth P440 million, was able to slip away despite a hold order by the DENR. The last shipment was demanded held by Rapu-Rapu as a sort of guarantee the rehabilitation plan would be complied with. Calleja said that, from the very beginning, the South Korean firm committed numerous violations with its continuous refusal to consult stakeholders regarding the health risks they faced following the mine’s closure in 2013.

In a complaint filed on January 16, 2014, at the Legazpi Regional Trial Court “for environmental protection order,” the former mine executive said the accused had “conspired to abandon the ecologically damaged Rapu-Rapu town.” Charged were then Environment Secretary Ramon JP Paje, Mines and Geosciences Bureau Director Leo L. Jasareno, DENR Region 5 executive Director Gilbert C. Gonzales and MGB Regional Director Theodore Rommel E. Pestaño. Gonzales has been promoted as Environment Management Bureau director in June, with Paje’s niece Crisanta Paje Rodriguez succeeding as Bicol DENR regional director.

The charged foreign mining firms and executives were Rapu-Rapu Minerals Inc., Rapu-Rapu Processing Inc., Rapu-Rapu Holdings Inc., Korea Malaysia Philippines Resources Inc., Young Tae Park, Jason Lim, Soon Bang Ko, Melvin Alonso, Rogelio E. Corpuz, Marc Campos, Ben Dayao, Young Bong Ha, Mohd Ajib Anvar and Jung Sik Kho.



Aside from Calleja, complainants included former Rapu-Rapu Councilors Giovani Guapo and Marino Baranda, and the Integrated Bar of the Philippines Albay Chapter President Emerson Aquende. Guapo and Baranda are serving as incumbent Rapu-Rapu councilors.

Court records obtained showed the first filed environmental case with damages was dismissed by RTC Branch 1 Presiding Judge Solon B. Sison on April 13, 2015, for lack of merit. The court record showed a countercomplaint for damages is ongoing for trial.

Both Calleja and Baranda lamented the dismissal of the case with a counter-damage claim, saying they filed an appeal before the Court of Appeals.

The Rapu-Rapu mining operation started in 2005 by Australian-owned Lafayette Mining Philippines, which sold the operations to the South Korean group in 2007, after it suffered bankruptcy following the suspension of its operations by the Pollution Adjudication Board.

The PAB suspended its operation during its first year following two separate but succeeding cyanide spills in October 2005 that resulted in massive fish kill in the town coast and neighboring coastal communities in Albay and Sorsogon province.

The Rapu-Rapu mining operation was recommended for total closure by the Bastes Commission in 2007 created by then President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo in 2006 following the fish kills being traced by the DENR to the cyanide spills from the mining operation.

But reforms in operation promised by the Korean firm in 2007 led to the resumption of its mining operation. However, President Arroyo ignored the mining closure order recommended by the four-man commissioners of the independent Bastes Commission headed by Sorsogon Bishop Arturo Bastes.

Calleja said new Environment Sec. Gina Lopez whom she tagged as a genuine environmentalist should look into the rehabilitation of Rapu-Rapu. The Korean-owned consortium earlier estimated P704 million as the initial amount needed to rehabilitate the area under the FMRDP.

In a text message, Rep. Joey Sarte Salceda (Albay's Second District) reiterated his original statement in 2014 that as governor and chief executive of the province he was never consulted by the DENR regarding Rapu-Rapu rehabilitation plan. He said the dialogue on the rehabilitation was discussed solely between the DENR and the Korean executives.

Both Salceda and Paje were members of the Rapu-Rapu Mines Rehabilitation Fund Committee (MRFC), according to court records.

As Albay governor from 2007 to 2016, Salceda was adamant in his fight against mining, saying not a single mining operation in the country has ever uplifted the living conditions of their host communities while these mining firms enjoyed heavy profit, leaving the environment badly damaged.

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