

Philippines: Puerto Princesa is a cautionary tale as Duterte opens new mining areas

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Palawan Quicksilver Mines ceased mercury mining operations in 1976 and a community settled in the abandoned mining site. Four decades later, in 2017, the residents were found to have long been suffering from various ailments linked to mercury poisoning.

Sugary white beaches, pristine coral reefs, a variety of marine life, and lush tropical forests astoundingly filled with dense flora and fauna. But also limestone, nickel, chromite, copper, iron, and mercury, among other minerals.

Palawan's rich natural resources have lured not just tourists from all corners of the globe, but also international companies such as mining firms that are keen to do business.

These days Palawan's mining industry has its stronghold south of the island - in Bataraza and Quezon, where big firms such as the Rio Tuba Nickel Mining Corp. and the Berong Nickel Corp. operate; and also in Narra and Brooke's Point, where Citinickel Mines and Development Corp. and Ipilan Nickel Corp. are located.

What many do not know is there was a time when even the capital city, Puerto Princesa, was once mined for its mercury. The area of operations of the now defunct Palawan Quicksilver Mines Inc. (PQMI) was so big that the tailings - the mineral ores - formed an expanse of reclaimed land on the shoreline of Honda Bay.

PQMI ceased operations in 1976 and a community settled in the abandoned mining site. Four decades later, in 2017, the residents were found to have long been suffering from various [ailments linked to mercury poisoning](#).

This is Puerto Princesa's dirty secret. It's a cautionary tale for local government units (LGUs) as President Rodrigo Duterte [lifts a nine-year ban on issuing licenses for new mining agreements](#), opening more areas around the country to large-scale miners.

While environmental laws have evolved since PQMI operated in Puerto Princesa, mining disasters are common. In the country's worst mining catastrophe, the 1996 Marcopper disaster in Marinduque province, 1.6 million cubic meters of toxic mine tailings were released into the Boac River when a drainage tunnel was fractured. It caused illnesses that residents [suffer from to this day](#).

In Palawan, like many mining areas in the country, public opinion is divided. Residents are aware, thanks to the activism of the late Gerry Ortega and the late Environment Secretary Regina "Gina" Lopez, of the industry's risks and dangers even as they recognize the benefits in terms of increased revenues and livelihood generation.

As another election approaches, candidates in mineral-rich communities will likely be asked about

their stand on mining issues. Are their communities prepared for the long-term consequences of mining?

In Palawan, in particular, should the industry continue to operate in a province where people heavily rely on the environment for livelihood and on tourism for employment?

News breaks about mercury contamination

News broke in June 2017 about mercury poisoning in the coastal barangays of Sta. Lourdes and Tagburos, two villages in the outskirts of the urban center. Seventy out of 90 residents of the PQMI's abandoned mercury mine tested positive for mercury poisoning, based on a report from the City Health Office (CHO).

Later, Palawan journalist Redempto Anda published an in-depth story in the Philippine Daily Inquirer describing the extent of the poisoning. The evacuation of 10,000 residents in the area, many of whom lived in the immediate vicinity of the lake, was recommended in a study by the Department of Health (DOH) and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). "Elevated levels of mercury" were detected in samples taken from the majority of the residents.

It was also found that residents were unaware that their chronic ailments were tell-tale signs of Minamata disease, which was named after the Minamata Disaster in Japan, wherein residents living in the area suffered from severe mercury poisoning symptoms due to mercury waste dumped by a private company into Minamata Bay. They complained of gingivitis, gum discoloration, respiratory problems, headaches, palpitations, difficulty sleeping and concentrating, memory problems, and respiratory problems.

It was believed that these ailments were a result of ingesting fish and shellfish from the lake. Mercury poisoning may also be blamed for reported deformities, and even deaths, throughout the 1950s when the mercury mine was still operational.

PQMI operated in Palawan from 1956 to 1976. In that period, nearly 2,900 tons of mercury were extracted from the site, and two million tons of mineral ores were dumped into Honda Bay, based on a 2003 article published in the science journal *Environmental Geology*.

The huge volume of mineral ores formed a reclaimed land, which is now a wharf that houses a small community — Purok Honda Bay.

The wharf is a lifeline for Puerto Princesa's tourism industry, as it is a jump-off point to several island-hopping spots in Honda Bay, such as Cowrie Island.

The company suspended its mining and milling operations in 1976 due to "continuing adverse factors including the very low world market price for mercury and increasing cost of production," based on its declaration with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC).

It left a three-hectare open pit that eventually filled with water -- deep enough to form an artificial lake which residents used for tilapia farming. It flows into the Honda Bay via the Tagburos River.

One of the first known studies about mercury contamination in the area was conducted in 1995 following fears of a Minamata occurrence. Based on limited samples taken from the wharf and from residents, however, the researchers concluded that the toxicological hazard data presented by state environment and health officials was "considerably lower than initially reported" and "provide no environmental or toxicological justification for immediate remedial action."

More scientific studies have been conducted since. In 2015, researchers from the Palawan State University reported that many residents had possible symptoms of mercury poisoning although they did not attribute their ailments to the mining operations. They thought the toxic fumes were no longer active because the mine had been abandoned for years.

“The level of mercury in Barangay Santa Lourdes is extremely beyond the standard level; however, the residents living near the contaminated area lack awareness of the said contamination. They believe that contamination results in the occurrence of an epidemic disease. They are not aware that the symptoms of mercury may be exhibited gradually or may even be unnoticed or taken for granted, such as headache and fatigue,” the study said.

“Another concern is that some of the community members still go fishing [at] the pit lake and plant crops, which makes the potential intake of mercury a cycle. Moreover, some of the residents continue selling these gathered resources (fish and crops) in the market thereby increasing the extent of the risk of contamination to the consumers. If information and education campaigns are not conducted immediately, the chain of contamination will continue, increasing the potential risks to other people,” it added.

Evacuation and relocation

The DOH and DENR’s recommendation in 2017 was urgent, but evacuating and relocating the residents would prove to be a challenge.

Based on information obtained through a data request to the City Housing Office, only those living within a 20 meter radius of the lake, 26 families, were relocated. The surveying and relocation transpired in 2017, and concluded as well in the same year.

The complete survey showed that a total of 75 households - lot owners and structure owners - lived within the surveyed area, which covered a radius of more than 40 meters from the lake.

Out of the 26 families relocated, 19 were relocated to Barangay Mangingisda, a rural barangay, and seven were relocated to Barangay Sicsican, located in the city proper. Each family was given P10,000, according to the report.

“In Barangay Mangingisda, nine awardees received lot only and 10 awardees received house and lot, while seven families picked the Medina relocation site (lot) as their relocation area which is located at Barangay Sicsican,” the cover letter of the data request read.

However, the attachment shows that only 13 individuals claimed their cash assistance through a barangay secretary. Ten of the claimants were from the 20m radius, while three were from the 40m radius.

Additional documents showed that the three families in the 40m radius also received P10,000, but there was no indication if these families were transferred to a different location. The official payroll document, however, does state that the aid is labeled “Financial Assistance for Victims/Family Affected by the Mercury Contamination.”

One of the challenges to evacuation and relocation have to do with residents legally owning parcels of land near the abandoned mine, said Angel Madriñan, senior environmental management specialist at the City Environment and Natural Resources Office (City ENRO). The office was tasked to be one of the supervisory bodies for the PQMI lake rehabilitation.

Madriñan said some of the land around the lake had been converted into alienable and disposable

lands by the national government, so the landowners did not consent to fencing off some parts of the lake.

“Mayroong mga property owners na hindi talaga nagbigay ng consent. Nagkaroon kasi ng conflict na kahit na sinasabi nating mineral lands [ang area], pero mayroong mga nakakuha ng titulo. Pagka ganoon, hindi natin basta-basta mapipilit unless magkakaroon ng reversion sa title nila, para maging mineral lands,” he explained.

(There were property owners who did not consent to fencing parts of the lake. There was a conflict in the status of the area because even if the properties were part of mineral lands, some people obtained titles to them. In that case we can't force them, unless there's a reversion in the titles to the status of mineral lands.)

The City ENRO assisted the national government in information campaigns prior to relocating residents, and cooperated with the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD) in putting up signs to warn locals about the dangers of mercury poisoning. Especially targeted were those who refused to be relocated. Some residents who possessed titles to lands in the area demanded the same type of land from the city government if they were to be relocated. Others simply did not want to believe in mercury poisoning.

“Sinasabi talaga namin sa kanila na may masamang epekto ang mercury sa atin, kaso lang, kasi doon na sila lumaki, doon na sila tumanda, and yet buhay pa rin daw sila, so minsan ‘yon mga ganoong klase ng pag-iisip ay hindi namin kontrolado,” Madriñan added.

(We told them about the harmful effects of mercury, but they said they grew up in the area, they grew old there, and yet they are alive. We can't control that kind of thinking.)

City Housing Officer Nancy Pedrosa declined to give an interview to discuss further details of the relocation efforts.

Rehabilitation, treatment

In 2019, the national government stepped in to solve the problem of the contaminated lake. The project manager, Alvin Requimin of the DENR Mining and Geosciences Bureau (DENR-MGB), said rehabilitation of the PQMI Lake was stalled due to the pandemic. Rehabilitation efforts involved planting flora that can absorb mercury, he said.

“Based on my visit itong taon lang na ito, nakita ko naman na almost vegetated na ang northern part kasi ‘yon ang tina-target namin dahil we need to stabilize ‘yong ground in the northern portion of the pit lake. Nagkakaroon [kasi] ng erosion, at sediment bar down from high elevation down to the pit lake,” Requimin said in an interview.

(I visited the area this year and saw that the northern part was almost vegetated. We were targeting that part because we need to stabilize the ground in the northern portion of the pit lake. There was erosion happening and a sediment bar from a high elevation down to the pit lake.)

Plants such as vetiver grass and some species of bamboo have phytoremediatory properties, meaning they can absorb hazardous chemicals in the ground where they are planted.

Other rehabilitation efforts, such as additional landscaping, building of structures to stabilize some areas, were also stalled because the budget allocated by the city government was reprogrammed to the Covid-19 response. The initial funding for infrastructure was worth P10-million, according to Requimin.

Once the project is complete, the mine site will serve as a research facility for scientists who want to study the effects of mercury in its natural environment, he said. The entire area, not just the lake, is a natural wellspring of mercury, he said.

In 2017, the DOH also vowed to treat some residents affected by mercury poisoning. According to Dr. Rommel Lizan, environmental and occupational health program manager, a total of 104 patients were targeted for chelation therapy. Chelation therapy involves injecting chemicals into the patient's bloodstream through an intravenous line. The chemicals will bind the toxic minerals in the body, which will eventually be expelled through urination.

"We passed the ball to the local government of Puerto Princesa. [After that], *wala na kaming nabalitaan kasi* based on sa records ko, that was the last time [in 2017] that we made the recommendation. Ang chelation will take up hundreds of thousands of pesos, hindi namin alam sino ang magsho-shoulder noon, and we had to take those patients to Metro Manila," he said.

"*Kami*, sa DOH, we could shoulder the housing of the patient, may mga halfway houses naman kami, pero siyempre ang treatment per patient, hindi namin alam sino ang magsho-shoulder," he added.

Dr. Lizan instructed to ask more questions from the City Health Office to ask about who will pay for their treatment and other logistical matters. Dr. Ricardo Panganiban of the City Health Office, however, said in an interview that he had lost track of the recommendation. He was tasked to oversee Puerto Princesa's Covid-19 response after a surge of new cases hit the city in March 2020.

Accountability

Can the victims run after PQMI? Madriñan isn't optimistic. He said it would be a challenge because they would need to track down the company's owners, if any of them were still alive. There were no environmental laws in place when the PQMI was established, he said.

DENR Secretary Roy Cimatu said in June 2017 that the department would [initiate legal action against PQMI](#).

In the case of the Minamata Disaster in Japan, a total of 2,492 victims reached a settlement with the Chisso Corp., which was responsible for the mercury pollution. The company was ordered by a court to pay each victim a lump sum of 2.1 million yen. When other victims came forward, the company also agreed in an out-of-court settlement to each pay them monthly medical allowances of 12,900 to 17,700 yen. These were just two of the many lawsuits that the Chisso Corporation faced, and is still facing up to this day.

The national government of Japan and the Kumamoto Prefectural Government, where Minamata Bay is located, were also ordered to shoulder the costs of victims' medical treatment.

In the Philippines, new laws are in place, such as the 1992 Strategic Environmental Plan (SEP) Law enforced by the PCSD and mining moratoriums that are sometimes imposed by the DENR. There are several requirements before a mining company can operate.

Republic Act 7942, also known as the Philippine Mining Act of 1995, requires mining companies to undergo an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), aside from securing the necessary permits from the local government unit where they will operate.

In Palawan, Duterte's orders to lift the suspension of mining companies included in the late Environment Secretary Regina Lopez's 2017 blacklist have put local officials at odds with businesses.

The Office of the Ombudsman recently suspended the mayor of Brooke's Point, environmental lawyer Mary Jean Feliciano, for blocking the Ipilan Nickel Corp.'s local permits and refusing to allow them to operate. Ipilan brought the complaint to the Ombudsman, citing "abuse of authority."

Feliciano's one-year suspension started in late June. She remains defiant in her anti-mining stance, and has amassed a significant following in Brooke's Point.

Ipilan was one of the mines included in Lopez's moratorium, along with another Palawan-based mining company, Citinickel Corp.

Citinickel, based in Narra, was also at odds with the mayor, Gerandy Danao, who alleged that the company owed money to the municipal government. Danao, a farmer who opposes coal and mining, was suspended in September 2020 by the Provincial Board following several administrative complaints filed by his own vice mayor, who became acting mayor, along with a majority of the Narra Sangguniang Bayan.

Danao, who will be back in office in November 2021 due to a shortened suspension, believed that his detractors wanted him out of office because of his anti-mining stance.

More of these clashes could erupt around the country as the government is set to approve new mining operations.

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