

Defensor to int'l mining foes: Back off, or else . . . - April 27, 2005

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By Blanche Rivera

Inquirer News Service

BACK off or you'll be arrested.

This was the warning issued Monday by Environment Secretary Michael Defensor to international anti-mining advocates after meeting with tribal elders from Mindanao who claimed that they were being used by foreign groups in their anti-mining campaign.

"They have no right to meddle in the affairs of the country. They should respect the policies of the Philippines, especially the economic policy to do mining," Defensor said in a press conference at the central office of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) Monday night.

Defensor noted that international non-government organizations were becoming invasive in their efforts to rally support against mining activities not only in the Philippines but worldwide.

"I don't mind that they have an advocacy, but for them to agitate, finance people (to go against mining), that's a different thing... I can go to the point of having them arrested if we have proof that they are directly agitating communities," Defensor said.

Foreign NGOs

Defensor aired the warning after leaders of the 2,000-strong Siocon Subano Association Inc. (SSAI) complained that foreign NGOs were claiming before the international community that the tribe opposed the gold mining operation of Toronto Ventures Inc. (TVI) in Siocon town, Zamboanga del Norte province.

SSAI president Juanito Tumangkis said the "biggest problem" of the indigenous community in Siocon was the persistent attempt of the NGOs to convince them to oppose TVI operations in their ancestral land.

"But we are not opposed to TVI. We have a MOA (memorandum of agreement) with them, and they have agreed to give us royalties. The NGOs are quoting people who are against mining, but there are less than 10 of them," Tumangkis said, speaking in Tagalog.

The TVI has already remitted around P1 million to the SSAI since August last year, he said. The Canadian firm has also spent some P30 million for social development projects in the community such as a school and a medical center.

Six Subanon leaders, along with their lawyer Pablo Bernardo, met with Defensor Monday to air their complaints against the foreign NGOs.

The leaders submitted affidavits belying the anti-mining pronouncements of a certain Jose "Boy" Anoy, who claimed to be a Subanon timuay, or tribal leader, even if he was not. Anoy has been quoted by international NGOs to prove that TVI's activities were being opposed by the indigenous community.

The SSAI identified the international NGOs as Mining Watch-Canada, the London-based Christian Aid and Indigenous People's Links, and the Diopin Committee on Mining Issues based in Dipolog City.

Bernardo said not one of the NGOs have sought out their comments on TVI's operations, opting instead to talk to Anoy and Onsiro Mato, known supporters of small-scale miners.

The Subanons have also asked Senator Jamby Madrigal, chair of the Senate committee on culture, to investigate the interference of the NGOs in their community.

From: Defensor to int'l mining foes: Back off, or else . . . - April 27, 2005
http://news.inq7.net/common/print.php?index=1&story_id=35083&site_id=16