

Written by

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By JOSEPH G. LARIOSA

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Carpetbaggers Back Off My Boyhood Town!

CHICAGO (*jGLi*) – When I was a young boy vacationing in the native town of my mother, Consolacion G. Garra, in Matnog, Sorsogon, Luzon’s gateway to Southern Philippines, I always wondered why its white beaches had sprinklings of black sands.

It turned out those black sands are called “margahas,” which I later came to know as magnetite sands.

## Joseph Lariosa Takes Up the Cudgels for “Save Matnog, Stop The Iron Project” - MabuhayRadio

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With no money to buy toys, we used these *margahas* to entertain us. We would put a trickle of these black sands on top of a small piece of grade school pad paper and put a magnet or magnetite stone ( *bato balani*) below the paper and we would run the magnet in different directions.

Because the *margahas* is attracted to the magnets, these black sands would stand up on end, like soldiers, if we moved the magnet or *bato balani* below the paper. The *margahas* would follow the magnet like dutiful soldiers.

And it gave us a kick because it put matters under our control.

I had no idea that these *margahas* and *bato balani* abundant in Matnog and the whole of the Bicol region were iron oxide minerals that are often mined as an ore or iron. It is commonly used as abrasive in water jet cutting, as toner in electrophotography and as micronutrient in fertilizers, as pigments in paint, etc.

These magnetic minerals attracted nationwide attention in November 2005 when two sacks of dead fishes were allegedly buried in Barangay Binosawan in Rapu-Rapu, an island town of Sorsogon's neighboring province

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of  
Albay  
to the north.

For these *margahas* and *bato balani* to be of commercial use, they have to be mined. During their mining, they would give off toxic discharges, like cyanide, that emptied into Albay Gulf and into the Pacific Ocean that flowed south to neighboring towns of Prieto Diaz, Gubat, Barcelona, Bulusan and Bacon (now part of the capitol town of Sorsogon City), all in Sorsogon province.

## **GLORIA ARROYO’S SHINING MOMENT**

The cyanide poisoning caused massive fish kills in the area prompting President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to create the Presidential Rapu Rapu Fact Finding Commission Report, and a separate DENR (Department of Environment and Natural Resources) Assessment of the Rapu Rapu Polymetallic Project, both in 2006.

In one of then-President Arroyo’s rare shining moments, she approved the Commission’s report to junk the “\$45-million in capital investments from Lafayette, Philippines, Inc. (LPI) of Australia, as well as \$10-million investments from LG Group of

Korea

” that were jointly mining in Rapu Rapu. Ms. Arroyo learned that LPI’s Country Manager Mr. Roderick Watt “inadvertently stated in his letter” to her that LPI’s PEZA (Philippine Economic

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Zone Authority) application did not need the Mayor’s (Rapu Rapu’s) concurrence.

More damaging, however, was the forgery of Rapu Rapu Sangguniang Bayan Secretary’s signature in the SB resolution that granted “ecozone” permit to LPI for tax-exemption.

As a PEZA registrant, LPI certified that it would not endanger public safety or public health or violate anti-pollution requirements by installing pollution-control devices.

As a result of the fish kills, the National Economic Development Authority recommended the LPI’s “tax-free status” revoked. While the DENR ordered the Bureau of Internal Revenue to investigate possible tax fraud as a mere two percent was paid in excise tax for the year 2005 for PhP 2,065,511.54, out of the \$2.4-million ore exported.

But the most damning information issued by the Commission is the finding that the “DENR, its bureaus, i.e., MGB (Mines and Geo-Sciences Bureau) and EMB (Environmental Management Bureau), its regional offices, including its monitoring team, (are) to be so dysfunctional as to be unable to prevent the occurrence of the October (fish kills) incidents. They simply did not have the sufficient capability of monitoring mining operations in Rapu-Rapu. Worse, though, is that if they had the capability, then, they utterly lacked will.”

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## **“UNWARRANTED AND UNTOLD SUFFERINGS”**

I wonder if my friend, Sorsogon Gov. Raul R. Lee, ever read these reports. He was quoted in the report as saying that in Sorsogon, the fish scare caused “unwarranted and untold sufferings” to fisher folk families, fish traders and the fish consuming public. Did the good governor ever sue the LPI for damages to assuage the “unwarranted and untold sufferings” of his constituents?

A registered mail sent me by Gov. Lee justifies the approval of a similar small-scale mining operation, like Rapu-Rapu’s, in a small barangay of Balocawe in Matnog consisting of 19,848 hectares.

The lucky mining permit holder is one Antonio Ocampo and/or Antonio Comercias, Jr. of No. 3 Barangay Tomolin, Ligao, Albay. He was given a permit on “Sept. 23, 2009, to extract 25,000 metric tons of iron ore from Sept. 23, 2009 , to Sept. 22, 2010 , with an option to renew for the same length of period.”

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**Writer’s Note:** Rapu-Rapu’s mining operation covers only 5,218 hectares and was able to extract 67,693 metric tons of gold ore mined in 2005 and exported \$2.4-million worth of ore.

Governor Lee was prodded to send me a letter after I e-mailed DENR Secretary Ramon J. Paje that he should listen to the petition of “Save Matnog, Stop The Iron Project.” Secretary Paje, in turn, forwarded my e-mail to Regional Director Reynulfo A. Juan of Mines and Geo-Sciences Bureau in Bicol. Mr. Juan sent me a registered mail, informing Governor Lee about my complaint.

In his letter to the Governor, Director Juan said, “(M)ay we recommend that the Provincial Government conduct the necessary validation on the issues being raised and to inform Mr. Lariosa directly on the actions taken by your office”?

## **THIS CABINET SECRETARY IS E-MAIL-FRIENDLY**

Governor Lee told me, the “Permit Holder (on Balocawe mining) was issued with an Environmental Compliance Certificate ( ECC) dated Aug. 13, 2009, by the DENR Environment Management Bureau (EMB V) on the basis of the submitted Project Study and Initial Environmental Examination Report after thorough evaluation of that Office who (sic) has the authority and capacity to undertake environmental assessment of projects within their area of

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jurisdiction.”

Mr. Governor, the permit was issued in August 2009, three years after the scathing Commission Report. My question to you is this: Did you get an assurance that remedial measures have now been undertaken since the Commission’s report in 2006 that indicted the “DENR, its bureaus (i.e. MGB (Mines and Geo-Sciences) and EMB (Environmental Management Bureau), its regional offices, including its monitoring team, (as) to be so dysfunctional as to be unable to prevent the occurrence of the October (fish-kill) incidents? They simply did not have the sufficient capability of monitoring mining operations in Rapu-Rapu. Worse, though, is that if they had the capability, then they utterly lacked (the) will”?

Does the mining permit holder have the LFI’s and LG’s of Korea combined resources in capital investment of \$55-million to operate a much-bigger “small mining” operation that will ensure the public safety or ensure public health and not violate anti-pollution requirements by installing “control devices”? If so, who are his business partners?

In the event of a disaster, like a massive fish kills, or loss of the threatened Philippine Eagle owl (*Bubo*, Philippines), whose nest will be displaced by the clearing of the biodiversity area and occurrence of mudslides, is the permit holder capable of buying disaster insurance from Lloyds of London to appropriately compensate future victims, who in your words, may run into “unwarranted and untold sufferings”?

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If you can answer, “yes” to all these questions, I will be behind this permit holder.

Meanwhile, I am appealing to President Noynoy Aquino and the Commission on Appointments to keep and confirm Mr. Paje as DENR Secretary and keep or promote Director Juan just for responding to my e-mail. Any other Cabinet Secretary or Bureau Director would have just deleted my e-mail complaint from their junk e-mails. ☐

**Happy New Year to all! # # #**

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