

***JGL Eye***

By JOSEPH G. LARIOS

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**Sorsogon Governor Lee May Face Unprecedented Recall Election**

CHICAGO (*jGLi*) – The Matnog Environmental Advocates Organization (MEAO) is a very tiny group named after the obscure municipality of my mother in Sorsogon province in the Philippines but its advocacy is getting noticed in this part of the world.

MEAO's advocacy is to be more conscientious with environmental disaster waiting to happen. It got a boost last week when an indigenous villager Maria Aguinda in Rumipamba, Ecuador, won a blockbuster \$9.5-billion judgment and brought to its knees U.S. giant Chevron for leaving behind an environmental damage for polluting the villager's rain

forest.

The multi-billion dollar judgment should send shockwaves to upstart mining companies in the Philippines, which ventured into this labor-intensive business fraught with environmental pitfalls.

One such debacle in the Philippines that escaped notice was the massive environmental hazards left behind by the United States in the early nineties when the Philippine Senate shut down the bases without first requiring the US to rid the bases of their hazardous materials.

Recently, the multi-national joint \$45-million investment from Lafayette, Philippines, Inc. (LPI) of Australia and the LG Group of South Korea whose contract to mine 18 out of 180 hectares, (not 5,218 hectares that I inadvertently wrote in my previous column), that straddle within Barangays Malobago, Pagcolbon and Binosawan in Rapu-Rapu, Albay province, north of Sorsogon province, was unceremoniously scrapped four months into the six- to seven-year operation following cyanide poisoning that triggered massive fish kills in the adjoining Pacific Ocean.

## **GRAVEL-AND-SAND MINERS**

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Now comes a little-known venture capitalist named Antonio Ocampo and/or Antonio Comersiasse Jr. who appears to be backed up by a gravel-and-sand delivery truck company euphemistically named Alexandra Mining & Oil Ventures, Inc. based in Quezon City in the Philippines advertising Matnog Ore Project as one of its "on-going mining projects." The Matnog Ore Project covers 19,840 hectares (not 19,840 hectares that I earlier mentioned in my column).

May I ask these venture capitalists if they have capitalization that comes close to the \$45-million put up by the LPI-Australia and LG Group and be ready to lose that kind of money when disaster strikes?

Are they ready to operate without PEZA (Philippine Economic Zone Authority) so that they will be paying 54-percent national and local taxes and they get only 46-percent of their ROI (return of investment)?

Do they have money held in an escrow account so that authorities can draw from it to be given away to victims of calamities and disasters that could be caused by mining operation in Balocawe in Matnog?

Do they have money that will be sourced from fine against them "for pollution" to solve among others the "Acid Mine Drainage (AMD) problem" and for "decommissioning" expenses after the mining operation and replanting of trees that were cleared prior to the mining operation?

"Rehabilitation and environmental and environmental mitigation measures" are expensive propositions.

### **DISASTER INSURANCE, ANY ONE?**

Without an escrow account, do they have a surety bond or disaster insurance to cover future victims of disaster that may result in the mining operation?

Do they have an ownership structure that will publicly show that the incorporators of the mining permit holder have capability to pay in case of damages by showing their previous statements of assets and liabilities? Are they ready to follow the recommendations of the Presidential Rapu Rapu Fact Finding Commission Report (PRRFFCR) and/or the DENR (Department of Environment and Natural Resources) Assessment of the Rapu Rapu Polymetallic Project (DARRPP) issued in 2006?

To avoid the multi-billion dollar fine in Ecuador against Chevron, are these mining permit holders ready to establish “baseline average health condition” by conducting medical tests and “blood work” of the population around the mining area free of charge so that they can show that the population has pre-existing medical health condition prior to and after the mining operation?

Can DENR Secretary Ramon J. P. Paje certify that it has now re-trained its personnel following the 2006 Rapu-Rapu debacle, which according to PRRFFCR exposed its personnel as having “dysfunctional monitoring system”?

And is there now an oversight mechanism that can oversee the operation before, during and after the mining operation?

If the answers to all of the above questions are “yes,” then, by all means, this mining permit holder should be allowed to mine the Matnog Ore Project.

Its approval should stop Governor Raul R. Lee from “politicizing” this project to harass the members of the Sorsogon Provincial Board, who are opposing the mining operation in Matnog.

Provincial board member Vladimir Frivaldo has complained that ever since he opposed the mining project of Matnog and the STL (small town lottery, the legalized *jueteng*), Governor Lee has been giving him a hard time.

### **LEE SHOULD BE RECALLED?**

The governor refused to give him detailed information where the previous and existing loans of the province went before he could support another request of the governor to obtain 350-million pesos loan (US\$8.1-million).

If the new loan is approved by the rubber-stamp Provincial Board, the loan of the province will balloon to 1-billion pesos (US\$23-million) if the previous loan obtained by his predecessor, his wife, then-Gov. Sally Lee, is added to it. He said a new slogan "Utang Sorsogon" will be added to "Bangon Sorsogon."

Mr. Frivaldo also questioned the poor judgment of Gov. Lee for appropriating his office with the third highest budget at more than 65-million pesos (US\$1.5-million) when the most important offices like the Provincial Agriculture Office, Provincial Cooperative Office, Provincial Nutrition

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Council, Provincial Social Welfare and Development are only getting P22.0 million (US\$.5-million), P700,000.00 (US\$16,279), P500,000.00 (US\$11,627) and P2.7-million (US\$72,790), respectively. Support to education and social services is only P1.9 million (US\$44,186).

Board Member Frivaldo also urged Governor Lee to build a new three-story Sangguniang Panlalawigan building because in the existing SP building when it rains outside, it also rains inside, soaking the Vice Governor, SP Members and secretariat staff.

Another complaint of Mr. Frivaldo is Governor Lee's disapproval of the six staff appointments in his office that is required under the Department of Interior and Local Government Code while Governor Lee's wife, Lee's son, then incumbent Sorsogon City Vice Mayor and Lee's grandson, SK Federation President are "suppressing opponents/critics of the administration policy."

If Mr. Frivaldo cannot charge Governor Lee with administrative violation of DILG Code before the Office of the President for grave abuse of discretion, he should initiate a preparatory recall assembly or by registered voters to recall Governor Lee as provided for by the Philippine Constitution. # # #

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