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Mining groups accused of blocking protected area in Palawan

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PUERTO PRINCESA -- Plans to declare as a protected area the biodiversity-rich forest enclave of Mt. Mantalingahan in Southern Palawan are facing setbacks after local village heads of the municipality of Brooke's Point, 192 kilometers south of the capital city of Puerto Princesa, passed resolutions withdrawing support to the move, allegedly upon instigation of mining companies operating around the area.

Nearly all of the 13 barangay (village) captains of Brooke's Point have signed two resolutions of withdrawal to the protected area development project, which is being pushed by the five municipalities around the range, claimed Efren Balmonte, barangay captain of Ipilán, Brooke's Point, during a radio program sponsored by the mining companies operating in Palawan.

Balmonte explained that they realized the project would result in the displacement of communities living around the proposed park.

"Babakuran pala nila ang [protected] area at paaalisin ang mga tao doon [They will fence the area and evict the people there]," he said.

He added that when they endorsed the project last year they were not told what would happen to the affected villagers.

The plan to delineate 120,457 hectares of mostly old growth forests around Mt. Mantalingahan is a joint effort of the five municipalities with technical support from Conservation International Philippines (CI) through a memorandum of agreement.

Last week, CI announced discovery of at least two new species -- an orchid and a mountain shrew -- during a five-week biological survey of the upper areas of Mantalingahan.

Brooke's Point Vice Mayor Jean Feliciano told the Philippine Daily Inquirer that the municipal council has yet to receive the resolution.

"We will discuss that in the council. But insofar as the commitment of Brooke's Point is concerned, we cannot just withdraw from it simply because of the signatures of the barangay captains," Feliciano said.

The Southern Palawan Planning Council, a body composed of all five municipalities covering Mt. Mantalingahan, meanwhile said that it had received endorsements to the protected area project from the irrigators' association.

In separate resolutions, the Brooke's Point Rural Waterworks and Sanitation Inc. and the Pangobillian Multi-Purpose Coop expressed support for the project, saying this will ensure the continued source of water for their farmlands.

"Around 59,000 people comprising 11,800 households of Brooke's Point are entirely dependent on Mt. Mantalingahan. We need to protect it," the resolution said.

Feliciano alleged that mining companies, who have business interests around Mt. Mantalingahan, are involved in a "disinformation campaign" to block its declaration as a protected area.

"I know for a fact that individuals identified with the mining companies are doing the rounds of the barangay to precisely ask them to oppose the project," Feliciano said.

One of the mining companies in the preliminary stage of conducting nickel mining operations in Brooke's Point, however, bluntly denied any hand in the barangay captains' resolution.

"We haven't expressed any opposition to that project. We were not directly affected by that. We already have our MPSA [mineral production sharing agreement] and we've already passed that stage of 'permitting'," Rufo Cabanlig, vice president for mining operations of MacroAsia Corporation, said in an interview.

MacroAsia is planning to operate a 25-year concession for nickel ore in Brooke's Point.

Feliciano claimed MacroAsia's got its MPSA from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) "under spurious

circumstances."

She alleged that the endorsement of the municipality of Brooke's Point had been "railroaded."

"They passed the resolution on first reading. The council didn't even go through public hearings. They just approved the endorsement immediately after the resolution was filed," Feliciano said.

She explained that when the previous council deliberated on the resolution for MacroAsia, the sponsor called for an immediate voting on the issue, which resulted in a 5-5 split, that was broken by the presiding officer, then Vice Mayor Danilo Chan, in favor of the company.

"Vice Mayor Chan was not even authorized to preside over that meeting because he was acting mayor when it happened," Feliciano said.

Worse, Feliciano added, the minutes of the council's deliberation on the MacroAsia mining project has been missing.

"I have instructed the council secretary to produce the record because it has been missing. When I took the position as vice mayor and now its presiding officer, I was told that the folder was missing," Feliciano said.

She claimed that the records would show that the council "railroaded" the endorsement for MacroAsia's mining project.

For its part, MacroAsia said it followed "proper procedures" in securing its permit from the DENR, including the endorsement of the municipality, as a condition to the granting of a final permit.

"I am not a lawyer and I cannot comment on how the municipality endorsed it. It's a parliamentary process and the important thing is we followed the proper procedures and we received the endorsement [from the municipality]," Cabanlig said.

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