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Poachers' vessels yield cyanide, formalin bottles

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PUERTO PRINCESA City – Two abandoned foreign fishing vessels that had sunk off the city pier, apparently due to lack of maintenance, yielded thousands of liters of toxic chemicals used in illegal fishing, city officials disclosed Tuesday.

Personnel of the Bantay Dagat, the environmental enforcement arm of the city government, have so far recovered from the seabed of Honda Bay, some 10 to 15 feet from the surface, over 3,000 bottles of toxic chemicals believed to be formalin and sodium cyanide.

The deadly chemicals were contained in 1-liter bottles, stashed inside the compartment of two wooden fishing boats, which local residents claimed were owned by Chinese poachers who had been detained for illegal fishing and whose cases are still pending in local courts.

Coast Guard and Philippine National Police maritime officials have yet to determine the name of the fishing vessels and the reason they had sunk.

Mayor Edward Hagedorn ordered the inspection of all fishing vessels docked at the city pier and had demanded an explanation from enforcement agencies on the sinking of the fishing vessels.

"I'm awaiting the report of the maritime police but I'm determined to get to the bottom of this. Those responsible for this deserve to be sanctioned," Hagedorn told the Inquirer.

Fishermen reported discovering the chemicals while they were fishing at the bay Tuesday.

Formalin is believed to be used by foreign fishermen to preserve fish caught in local waters while they await their return to their home ports that usually takes three to four months, according to local fishermen familiar with the operations of foreign poachers.

Sodium cyanide is a common ingredient in a potent mixture that is used to stun fish, particularly high-priced groupers, which are sold in Chinese restaurants in Manila and Hong Kong.

The chemical, which is banned in all forms of fishing, is extremely toxic and destroys coral reefs.

Several poaching and illegal entry cases against Chinese, Vietnamese and Malaysian fishermen are pending in local courts while their vessels are docked at the pier.

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