

Resort on coral reef draws protests

by NESTOR P. BURGOS JR.
Inquirer.net

ILOILO CITY—Two business groups in Boracay sought an immediate stop to the construction of a resort on top of a coral reef and in a no-build zone on the island.

The project is owned by a businessman said to be close to boxing champion Manny Pacquiao and Environment Secretary Joselito Atienza Jr.

In a joint statement, business groups Boracay Foundation Inc. (BFI) and the Boracay Chamber of Commerce and Industries (BCCI) deplored the construction of the Boracay West Cove Resort at Sitio Diniwid in Barangay Yapac, Malay town.

"We express our anger and frustration at the ongoing illegal and destructive construction activities," said the statement.

Photos of the project showed coral reefs already wrapped in concrete with a hut being built over them. A concrete bridge connects the reefs to the resort.

The resort, owned by Manila-based businessman Crisostomo "Cris" Aquino, had already drawn criticisms from owners of resorts and other stakeholders in Boracay for alleged violations, including the building of structures on a cliff and over coral reefs.

Close friends

Aquino is a close friend of Pacquiao, who is a protegee of Atienza.

"We are alarmed because these environmentally destructive activities have been going on for too long despite our protests," said Loubelle Cann, BFI president, in a phone interview.

Cann said the project was "putting to waste all our efforts and resources to rehabilitate and save Boracay's environment."

Also on Tuesday, Oct. 13, Aquino said the structures were just temporary so guests could reach the

hut from the resort during low tide.

Owners of resorts have questioned Atienza in August on the failure of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) to stop the alleged violations.

They wondered why the resort continued to operate even without permits from the local government and the DENR and despite allegedly violating an ordinance barring structures on no-build zones.

Legalization process

Atienza had said the resort was legalizing its operations by securing a Forest Landuse Agreement for Tourism Purposes (FLAGT), which would allow the continued operation of West Cove.

A FLAGT, under DENR Administrative Order 2004-59, allows the temporary use, occupation and development of any forest land for tourism purposes for 25 years, renewable for another 25 years.

The agreement covers forest lands to be used for bathing, campsites, ecotourism destinations and hotel sites.

Aquino, in an earlier interview, said the resort has a pending application for FLAGT covering 10,586 square meters.

Atienza has ordered the processing of the application after it was filed March 9, 2009.

Aquino said his resort applied for business and other permits but he could not be issued these permits until it has a FLAGT.

The resort has been operating without business and other permits since 2007, according to municipal officials.

"We cannot understand why the management of the resort is allowed to undertake these illegal and environmentally destructive activities," the business groups said in the statement.

"For the past two years, it appears that they are enjoying too much immunity and can do anything..."

Atienza has repeatedly said the DENR would crack down on violators of environmental laws on the island.

The community in Sitio Diniwid has also launched a signature campaign against West Cove. ■

Dam probe: No...

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Administration (Pagasa).

Rigor said San Roque should be getting information from Pagasa on the amount of rain that would fall.

However, the weather agency had been complaining that it did not have the Doppler radar to do that.

On the other hand, San Roque officials were only following "written instructions" from Napocor on the release of water from the dam on Oct. 6, Mariano said.

It was not automatic for them to inform the media about the release of water, according to Rigor and Nilo.

Pagasa would only announce the opening of a dam's floodgates out of concern, not as part of its job, Nilo added.

They would actually have to go through the National Disaster Coordinating Council, Nilo said.

San Roque would open floodgates three to six hours before, and municipalities would be informed through fax or patrol cars

deployed to deliver the message, Mariano said.

However, Espino said Tommy Valdez, San Roque Power Corp. vice president, only texted him and other mayors that water would be released.

They only knew that the floodgates would be opened through local leaders and non-government organizations, he added.

There was no early warning system and the water release was too sudden, Espino insisted.

The release of water from San Roque Dam was believed to be the reason why many areas in Pangasinan were submerged.

Several residents in Pangasinan were still in their homes when the floodwaters suddenly rushed in, leaving them with no time to evacuate.

Ermita said it is up to the concerned individuals or groups from Pangasinan if they want to pursue the class suit against Napocor and the San Roque Multipurpose Project.

Press Secretary Cerge Remonde welcomed the Senate probe and said that the results

will be added as inputs in the actions of the Executive branch in response to the calamities.

"First of all, we welcome the investigation that is being conducted by the Senate," he said.

"Second, we are watching the investigation and third, whatever information that has come out of the investigation, those that can be acted upon will be immediately acted upon by the Executive."

Remonde said President Arroyo has ordered the Department of Public Works and Highways to make the necessary repairs after local officials of Pangasinan raised their concerns about the dikes damaged by the floods.

"We will do anything and everything that is necessary in parallel or independently of what the legislature is doing to ensure, to improve disaster response and risk management in our country which is now being rocked by national disasters," he said.

The newly created reconstruction commission would look into the cause of flooding in Pangasinan and other parts of Northern Luzon, Remonde said. ■

Rich nations should fund RP rehabilitation - GMA

by PAOLO ROMERO
Philstar.com

PRESIDENT Arroyo called on rich countries to provide the bulk of funds for rehabilitating areas ravaged by tropical storm "Ondoy" and typhoon "Pepeng," saying the country had been a victim of climate change.

Mrs. Arroyo said the Philippines would need much more money to fund relief and reconstruction efforts following the recent record rains brought by the two weather disturbances that left more than 710 people dead and caused billions of pesos in damage.

Speaking at the Mid-Year Economic Briefing at the Shangri-La Hotel in Makati City, Mrs. Arroyo said that in seeking foreign help, the country will stress that it is "not a culprit of climate change."

"We are a victim. We are not a climate maker but we certainly are a climate taker," she said.

Developed countries account for the bulk of greenhouse gas emissions that scientists all over the world have blamed for global warming, she said. But developing nations are the most vulnerable to severe weather disturbances brought about by climate change.

United Nations climate chief Yvo de Boer had said climate change increased the severity of Ondoy.

"Victims are compensated, not penalized with high interest rates and conditionalities," the President said, adding that the Philippines had made a tiny contribution to climate change.

"And that is why we are very grateful to the United Nations for the flash appeal that they have launched to mobilize grants (for the victims of Ondoy)," Mrs. Arroyo told a group of diplomats, economists, business leaders and fund managers.

Mrs. Arroyo said the government's first priority would be to secure grants and concessional loans.

"Commercial borrowings either through bonds or other instruments should be the last financing option," she said.

She said the newly created Special National Public-Private Reconstruction Commission would soon oversee a "pledging session" of potential donors for funds.

Albay Gov. Joey Salceda, who proposed the creation of the commission, said at least \$1 billion is needed to finance massive and long-term reconstruction projects, including those on risk reduction.

Philippine Long Distance Telephone Co. chairman Manuel Pan-

gilinan chairs the commission with Cebu Archbishop Ricardo Cardinal Vidal and Finance Secretary Margarito Teves acting as co-chairmen.

"Depending on the recommendation of the special commission, we may issue reconstruction bonds" to be supervised by the National Development Corp. "which seems to be the favorite recommendee of economic managers and business leaders as far as being an issuer of bonds is concerned, whether peso or dollar, to which multilaterals such as the World Bank and the ADB (Asian Development Bank) may subscribe," she said.

"But even then, we'd rather that the primary response of our administration to the enormous calamities which climate change is bringing to our vulnerable country cannot just be another borrowing program. We don't want to let grant opportunities go to waste. Although lesser in size than loans, they remain substantial," Mrs. Arroyo said.

She gave no figures on how much money the country needs. But, speaking at the same forum, Agriculture Secretary Arthur Yap said the agriculture sector suffered P18.4 billion in damage with half a million hectares of rice lands flooded.

Damage to infrastructure exceeded P5 billion, other officials said.

She said she has ordered Teves to make sure the new commission is a public-private sector partnership rather than led by the Department of Finance and to coordinate a special pledging exercise "with a higher international profile."

"This special pledging session would tap into the huge underlying global constituency for climate change adaptation," she said.

"It would capitalize on the ongoing discussions and negotiations leading to Copenhagen," Mrs. Arroyo said, referring to the global summit on cutting greenhouse gases in December.

She pointed out the Philippine case is being cited as justification for the need for climate change adaptation financing. "And that is why we should use the umbrella not only of the World Bank but also of the UN framework (in raising funds)," Mrs. Arroyo said.

Meanwhile, the President will push for closer and better regional cooperation on climate change and disaster risk and response at the 15th Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit in Thailand next week.

"This (cooperation on disaster risk and response and climate change) will definitely be among the issues that will be pushed forth by the President in the ASEAN summit," Press Secretary Cerge Remonde said.

The country's horrific stretch of weather began on Sept. 26, when tropical storm Ondoy (international codename Ketsana) dumped the heaviest rains in more than four decades on Metro Manila and surrounding areas.

At least 337 people were killed, according to official estimates, and parts of the city are expected to remain flooded for months.

Exactly one week after Ondoy, typhoon Pepeng (Parma) hit Northern Luzon and hovered over the area as a tropical storm for a week, causing massive flooding and landslides that killed at least 375 people.

Positive growth

But despite the recent calamities and the lingering global economic crisis, President Arroyo said the country is still likely to post growth.

In her speech at the same business forum, Mrs. Arroyo cited a report from The Economist Intelligence Unit that said the Philippine economy has not contracted despite the global economic crisis.

She said the country posted uninterrupted growth every quarter in the last eight years "and that is one of the important things we have achieved and which has enabled us to be resilient during the food, global and now climate change crises."

"First there was a global food crisis, then a global financial and economic crisis, and now we have a climate change crisis," she said.

"But the result of our reforms is a Philippine economy that is stronger and more able to withstand shocks such as those that the three global crises have been throwing at us," Mrs. Arroyo said.

"We have achieved much in the areas of infrastructure investment, job creation and macroeconomic stability that have helped us in the worst of these crises," she said.

She said Moody's Investor Service upgraded the Philippine credit rating last July, and even the damage from the two recent typhoons was "deemed manageable" or enough to convince rating and multilateral agencies to maintain their positive outlook on the economy for this year. ■



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