

CHR to investigate 'abuses' by mining firms in Surigao

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The Commission on Human Rights (CHR) has formed a team to look into reported abuses committed by multinational mining companies operating in the twin provinces of Surigao.

Human Rights chair Loretta Ann Rosales said among the alleged abuses the team will look into are irregularities in the acquisition of mine permits, displacements of the "lumad" and environmental destruction.

"The CHR will form a comprehensive monitoring team and investigate these claims of abuses by mining firms," Rosales told the Inquirer during a visit here on Thursday.

She vowed that the investigation would not be futile and that the lumad communities' rights would be upheld and their grievances addressed.

"I guarantee them that the CHR will look after them," Rosales said.

On Monday, the Tribal Coalition of Mindanao Inc. (Tricom) asked the Supreme Court to cancel all mining permits, licenses and agreements granted to five Chinese mining companies operating in Surigao del Sur and Surigao del Norte.

Spurious documents

Tricom claimed that Taganito Mining Corp., Platinum Group Metals Corp., Oriental Synergy Mining Corp., Shenzhen Mining Group Corp. and Marcventures Mining and Development Corp. used spurious tribal consent documents to secure licenses and permits.

Tribal communities were also uprooted and dislocated as a result of the mining activities, Tricom said.

Tricom also alleged that the said mining companies threaten the environment and the health of the lumad communities by operating open-pit mines in Claver, Surigao del Norte, and the towns of Carascal and Cantilan in Surigao del Sur.

Mamanwa tribal chieftain Alfredo Olorico also said President Aquino should fulfill his campaign promise of a transparent and accountable government by cancelling anomalous mine agreements, permits, licenses and agreements in the province.

"The President must intervene now because we were defrauded through clear machinations, deceit and manipulations by government officials and mining interests," he said.

Sought for comment, the newly appointed head of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) in Caraga region said the CHR investigation was timely, and could ferret out the truth.

Start from central office

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"I'm very much open to any investigation, but the CHR must start its probe at our central office because the problem started there," Dominador Gomez said.

He admitted that the process of acquiring consent from tribal communities in connection to mining permits "has been marred with irregularities and rampant violations of the Indigenous People's Rights Act of 1997."

"There were really huge controversies related to the proper enforcement of this consent mechanism during the term of my predecessor. Our lumad brothers were abused and placed at a disadvantage," Gomez told the Inquirer.

Under the law, mining companies seeking to operate within ancestral lands were mandated to secure free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) from lumad communities.

"This consent mechanism supposedly empowers tribal minorities whether to accept or reject mining in their lands," he said.

But Gomez said that in Caraga, at least 20 mining companies had questionable FPICs and their licenses were now being reviewed.

He said the NCIP even started a crackdown on erring NCIP personnel, who have reportedly colluded with mining companies to produce spurious FPICs. (Inquirer.net)