

# A River Dies in Siocon:

## Canadian Mining Company Disrupts Peace among the Subanons

Alyansa Tigil Mina

by Alyansa Tigil Mina

*Siocon is like any other town in the Philippines. Endowed with a large area consisting of forests and watersheds, it relies on farming and fishing for livelihood. But the similarities end there. Siocon, located southwest of Dipolog City in Zamboanga del Norte, is a town with abundant mineral deposits. The deposits are of such quantity that it is now a primary target of big mining companies.*

**In** 1997, TVI Resources Development Philippines, Inc. (TVIRD), a Canadian mining company, acquired mining rights to 486 hectares in Siocon, particularly in Sitio Canatuan. The mining company's operation signals the start of the degradation of the environment and the exploitation of the Subanons who live there and who regard Mount Canatuan a sacred site.



### Subanon

Subanon, which means people of the river, are indigenous peoples in the Southern Philippines.

source: <http://www.philsol.nl/B01/Subanon-jul01.htm>

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Following TVIRD's acquisition of mining rights, the Subanons were removed not just from their land but from their sources of livelihood. Subsequent events also cut a deeper pain among the Subanons. Armed men now stand guard at Mount Canatuan, prohibiting their entry into old residences.

"We believe that Mount Canatuan is a living entity. It is a very sacred place for us," said Timuay Boy. "There was a time when a plague hit Siocon and people were dying. The Timuay at that time summoned a meeting and decided to

perform a ritual at Mount Canatuan to ask help from the gods. After that, the deaths ceased and the plague ended. We believe Mount Canatuan is a sacred ground not only because it is our place of worship but because it is a symbol of our tribe. Without land, we have no identity. Without an identity, we have no dignity."

Timuay Boy recalled that during the late 80's, small-scale mining started in the area. It was also the start of their fight against mining.

"Our fight against mining started with the small-scale miners. We didn't want them to destroy the mountain and its resources. It really affected us when they became aggressive. Then, Benguet Mining Company got interested and started explorations in 1991," he said. Sensing an imminent danger, the Subanons opposed the explorations and started sending out letters to show their dismay.



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“We wrote government agencies and started calling the attention of concerned citizens and groups. We strongly opposed the company’s planned large-scale operations. Eventually, they backed out,” recalled Timuay Boy.

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But they were not about to leave the Subanons in peace for a long time. After Benguet Mining transferred its rights, TVIRD entered the picture in 1994 and started exploring the area. Timuay Boy was not intimidated and in fact, strengthened his opposition. But things would prove to become more challenging.

“We intensified our opposition. We wrote to government agencies, and the local government units. But no one listened. There was no action. We tried all the legal processes available but our pleas fell on deaf ears. In 1999, the Subanons decided to stage a protest. We investigated TVIRD’s activities and we found out that it was an open-pit large-scale operation,” he recounted.

To everyone’s surprise, the protesters were arrested and chained. “TVIRD’s military personnel arrested the protesters and even gravely harmed some people in the crowd. They did not spare the women while they tied up the men like animals.”

Timuay Boy said the “harassment” of TVIRD did not end there. Those who joined the protest or voiced their opposition to the mining operations were forcefully evicted. Worst of all, emissaries from TVIRD continually harassed the other tribal leaders into convincing Timuay Boy to sign an agreement.

“They gave me a folder which contained the agreements and the financial rewards. Once, some of the members of our group were coerced to sign the agreement. But they didn’t sign it because their chieftain didn’t. They will only do so after I sign it,” he said. But that didn’t deter TVIRD from finding other ways.

TVIRD’s next strategy was to “divide and conquer,” which they did by organising a parallel group that would oppose Timuay Boy’s actions. “They even had an election. They got people from different places who are not really Subanons. That is a big insult to me and to our tribe,” Timuay Boy said.

It turned out that TVIRD is not simply organising a group but a Council of Elders that claims to represent the Subanons and duplicate the legitimacy of the traditional *Kabogolalan* or Council that existed long before the mining company’s arrival.

TVIRD denies that they are involved in the creation of the Council of Elders. It claims that the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) facilitated the process and when NCIP told them that the Council of Elders represents the community, that was the time they negotiated for a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA). So far, we do not have enough documentary evidence to support that TVIRD is indeed involved



**Tausug**  
An ethnic group in the  
Southern Philippines.

in forming the Council of Elders but TVIRD claims that being a responsible company, it supported NCIP's effort to resolve the leadership problem. In the MOA between the Council of Elders, TVIRD and the Siocon Subanon Association, Inc. (SSAI), it was clearly stated that SSAI organised the Council of Elders and it appointed SSAI as Administrator of their domain and their Attorney-in-Fact.

Timuan Boy lamented the fact that the Council of Elders was created due to the instigation of a Manila-bred Subanon lawyer, who got a non-Canatuan Subanon to lead the group.

"He went here to destroy the tribe, our culture and our bond. He will do all that just for money. It is very sad that some people would choose personal gain over the heritage that will be passed on to the future generation," said Timuay Boy.

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But most of all, he laments the fact that it is not only their livelihood that is affected but also their heritage as a Subanon. "They want to throw it (our culture) out and destroy our belief that Mount Canatuan is a sacred ground. It was in the 15th century that a Timuay declared the mountain as sacred and as the blood of a Timuay runs in my veins, it will continue to be sacred."

Though Timuay Boy's convictions are strong, he is homeless because he cannot go back to his own home. "It's been three years and I haven't been there because of the threat to my life, it's been also three years that I have not performed my ritual in the mountain," he sighed.

### **The despair of Norizam**

Norizam Sallam, 62, a Tausug, has lived all her life at Bucana, Siocon, a humble fishing community at the delta of Siocon River.

For seven months now, Norizam has not slept on her back. She sits, but even sitting up is a painful task. Putrid blisters cling to her skin, a film of tissue holds a bag of pus, hematoma runs on her shins and elbows. Her body has become corroded. Still, she struggles to cope. Every movement causes a twitch of pain or an occasional shock. She never thought her body would follow the fate of the river that once gave life to the community.

On October 2006, heavy rains brought tons of water and debris from the uplands, submerging the densely populated delta of the Siocon River. Because of the disaster, Norizam had to buy drinking water from a store. She had no choice but to wade through the murky water.

Later, parts of her body itched incessantly. She boiled water to wash off the contamination and ease the intense irritation, but the infection spread quickly to all parts of her body, starting from her hips and running to her buttocks.

“What am I going to do? I cannot sit or sleep. If I sleep lying down, my skin would stick into my clothing,” she recounted in despair. Her eyes well up with tears as she remembered the pain. It was as if she was being burned alive. Her health has significantly deteriorated, and her appetite has waned. Her weight has also drastically gone down.

She still could not believe what happened to her and to the river, which she has always known to give life. Now it’s as if the death of the river has summoned her to follow its fate—and she is not alone.

Upon seeing Norizam’s condition, the movement people interviewed her and conducted an immediate investigation. Mudjalla found out that even if these people are poor and uneducated, they know what has damaged their health. They were ‘silenced’ because they were afraid. Mudjalla has many speculations of what had caused their silence. “Some of them were paid or threatened,” she said.

There may be numerous cases of infections but there are no exact figures. Only those who can afford to go to the city can receive proper treatment. However, the majority of the affected communities are poor. They attempt to cure their diseases with traditional medicine, which sometimes made their condition worse.

When Norizam went to a community doctor, she was quickly given a prescription: a pack of tablets which almost drained the family’s savings. It worked temporarily. However, the diagnosis was inaccurate, something which was not surprising since there are no skin specialists in Siocon.

When her case was brought to TVIRD’s attention, the mining company promptly denied any wrong-doing. Instead, they reasoned out that TVIRD gives development projects to the community and should not be blamed.

Mudjalla and the SSPM strongly believe that the mining company’s operations have a direct relation to the deteriorating health conditions felt by the likes of Norizam.

“If it was the whole community, that may be compelling enough to make TVIRD realise their grave mistake. But we do not want to go into that. Norizam may be one individual but it is enough

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With Norizam’s ordeal, Sharifa Kumala Mudjala, a member of Save Siocon Paradise Movement (SSPM), expressed a heightened sense of despair and regret. “If we hadn’t visited the coastal community, we would not be aware of it. No one is talking,” she said. “It’s really disturbing.”

encouragement for us to continue fighting,” said Mudjalla.

### **The struggle of Endong**

A slow death. That is how Endong Canlas, president of the Siocon Fish Farmers Association describes their

“My house is near the huge open pit of TVIRD. My ordeal started when they began demolishing our harvests. They want us to lose our livelihood first and surrender to them. Aside from that, I received a lot of threats to my life,” said Manolita.

livelihood since TVIRD started full operation in Siocon.

“For hundreds of us who earn our living through the bounty of the sea, it was a major catastrophe since we have seen how our catch was affected,” Endong said. Their catch consists of talakitok, mangagat, and freshwater fish such as catfish, tilapia, etc. Today, scabies has infected twenty to twenty-five percent of these fish. The body of these fish festers in wound. Endong claimed that sometimes they would catch a live fish with half of its body already rotten. These fish, even with slight wounds, are thrown away.

“The siltation of the river made our catch worse and our livelihood is very much affected. We have to spend a gallon of gasoline to venture out to the clearer waters to be able to catch fish,” said

Endong who also insisted that before TVIRD had its mining operations, the river used to be clear and deep.

“It is easy to catch fish even near the shore. Now, with all the mud and toxic waste, the river has become inhospitable for life,” he said.

Fishpond operators in Siocon earn between PHP 40,000 to PHP 50,000 per hectare each month. After the disaster, in a span of four months, they are lucky if they are able to earn PHP 10,000. The continuous decrease in income is staggering and has a widespread effect in the community.

The mudflow that cascaded from the mine has caused massive siltation of the river. With that, no fish can be caught. “It really affected our livelihood and eventually our lives. We may just disappear from the map because we fear the river will drown our communities.”

### **The sacrifice of Manolita**

Manolita Galvez is not a Subanon, but she is part of the “extended family” of Timuay Boy when she was adopted legally by the tribal chief. She has been living peacefully in Mount Catanuan since 1989 until the land which gave her refuge turned out to be one of the most coveted by TVIRD.

“My house is near the huge open pit of TVIRD. My ordeal started when they began demolishing our harvests. They want us to lose our livelihood first and surrender to them. Aside from that, I received a lot of threats to my life,” said Manolita. At one point, she revealed that over 200 armed men came into their community and ordered them to flee. Some wore masks and carried high-powered guns.

Manolita soon found that the reason TVIRD was determined to kick her out of the property was because huge deposits of high-grade minerals can be found below her house.

“We have no match against their arms. We can only fight back through words,” said Manolita. “When we didn’t leave our place, they filed a case against us. I asked them why they did that even though we didn’t do anything. At first, we told them that they can operate within the community but they must not destroy our harvests and homes. But TVIRD was not contented; they want to get rid of us. If we don’t go, we will suffer.”

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The first show of force from TVIRD was heightened when they bulldozed Manolita’s house last June 23, 2006. “I was at my neighbor because we had a vigil. The farm lots were being bulldozed near the open pit, that’s why the Canatuan Farmers Association decided to have a vigil. We were all shocked when, at around 11 at night, masked men started destroying my house,” she recalled. She saw men on board two dump trucks with arms and guns. When Manolita’s group moved to stop the demolition, they were met with physical force.

“They were shouting at us that we were stubborn. *Matigas kasi ang ulo niyo*, they were shouting expletives,” Manolita said while they were made to witness their plants and trees being uprooted.

“Those who joined the vigil were threatened. Some even had guns pointed at their head. But they reserved the greatest blow for me. My husband was punched and beaten up. Five men took turns kicking him and punching him in the face,” recalled Manolita.

“I was treated like an animal. They dragged me out of my house. When I saw that my husband was being beaten up, I pleaded for mercy. I said, ‘He didn’t



do anything wrong!’ I questioned them: ‘Why are you doing this to us?’ And again they said, we are stubborn, ‘*matigas kasi ang ulo niyo!*’

When Manolita’s family was forcefully evicted, all their possessions were left behind and nothing could be retrieved. “When they confiscated all our things, they started demolishing the house. They got the roof, the floor, the doors. We witnessed our house crumble like it was built on top of sand,” Manolita cried.

After the attack, their neighbors were so distressed. “They were all sympathetic, but they could not do anything. They were also threatened, even with death,” she said.

It was not only Manolita and her husband who were traumatised; their daughter Marife, 31 suffered from trauma too.

“My daughter saw me being carried by four men and she thought I was already dead. She was inconsolable,” Manolita said.

When Timuay Boy learned about the incident, he was shocked and filed a case against TVIRD. The event also came to the attention of Dipolog Bishop Jose Manguiran who immediately provided accommodations for the couple in his residence. Yet, until now, they still receive death threats. A “reward” is even offered to those who can negotiate for Manolita to concede.

“They know that I’m here. But they can’t do anything out of respect for the Bishop. Right now, there’s a case filed before the Human Rights Commission (HRC). That’s why it’s better for them if we are dead so that the case may die too. TVIRD is a very irresponsible company. They are a violator of human rights,” said Manolita, who said that her husband’s collarbone was smashed because it was pounded on by an armalite.

It’s been a year since the ordeal. But still, there’s no word from the HRC. She is now pleading for this issue to be noticed by no less than the President of the Philippines.

“I’m calling on our President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to look into our plight. She is also a lady and she knows what my situation feels like. We’re asking for justice not only for ourselves but also the environment,” said Manolita. “I’m pleading for the people of Mount Canatuan whose rights are violated and whose way of life are destroyed by greed and hunger for money and power. Some are too afraid to speak up but I’m not afraid because I’m telling the truth.”

It’s been a year, yet Manolita feels as if the events unfolded just yesterday. “I still can’t sleep well. I always visit the Church and ask strength and guidance from Him. I know one day justice will be served.” ■

**Alyansa Tigil Mina** is a coalition of peoples’ organisations, non-government organisations, church groups, academe-based organisations that collectively challenge the aggressive promotion of large-scale mining in the Philippines. It is both an advocacy group and a people’s movement working in solidarity with women and men in mining-affected communities in the Philippines and the Asian region to protect communities and natural resources that are threatened by large-scale mining operations.

*This paper was part of a campaign report prepared by Alyansa Tigil Mina.*



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