

Quezon Tragedy

The country faced its worst tragedy of this young century when typhoons "Winnie" and "Yoyong," mercilessly swept through Central and Eastern Luzon. In the wake of the destruction, government estimates place the dead and missing at more than 1,500. Damage to crops and infrastructure was estimated at P752 million pesos¹.

The municipalities of Infanta, Real and General Nakar faced the way Ormoc did in 1993. Nature knows best but people would not take heed of this principle until some tragedy happens. One decade after, 660² people sacrificed their lives buried by landslides. All of these municipalities are found in Quezon province.

All blame points to logging, illegal and legal. Based on the account of elderly residents, logging in Quezon started in the early part of 1950's, when the export of logs and lumber became one of the biggest dollar earners and lucrative sources of income. By the end of the 1980's, commercial loggers slowed down with their operation, simply because of the presence of the NPA. Besides, little had been left to be logged. However, the operations of commercial logging companies and residents continued, having been blessed with timber license agreements (TLAs), integrated forest management agreements (IFMAs) or special private land timber

licenses by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

Since 1991, multisectoral groups and the church had been calling on the government to seriously implement a total log ban in Sierra Madre. The Multi-Sectoral Action Group (MSAG) in Quezon and Aurora said the government was deaf to their appeals for a large-scale corporate log ban. The companies responsible for the denudation are the Pacific Timber Export Corp., Verdant Agro-Forest Development Corp., Inter-Pacific Forest Resources Corp., Industries Development Corp., RCC Timber Co., San Roque Sawmill Corp., Benson Realty Development Corp., Toplite Lumber Corp. and Green Circle Properties and Resources Inc. Companies "patronized" the illegal loggers who were actually their sources of wood. Politicians who finance the operations control most "carabao loggers".³ As is usually the case, get the cash out and the logs will come.

The Pambansang Lakas ng Kilusang Mamamalakaya ng Pilipinas (Pamalakaya) urged President Macapagal-Arroyo to compel big logging syndicates to shoulder the cost of repairing the 13-kilometer Umiray tunnel in General Nakar. The group cited the extent of logging operations of International Hardwood and Veneer Corp. (13,527



hectares in Mauban, Quezon); Timberland Forest Products (34,660 hectares in General Nakar, Quezon); Industries Development Corp. (48,777 hectares in Aurora province); RCC Timber Co. (23,140 hectares in Aurora); Green Circle Corp. (30,000 hectares in General Nakar, Quezon) and Top Lite Corp. (8,630 hectares in Aurora province).⁴

The vast forest resources of Quezon province could be found in Real and General Nakar towns, which host hardwood timber, dipterocarp, mahogany, lauan and narra. In terms of actual cover, General Nakar is overwhelmingly forested. Of the total land area of 134,390 hectares, 84 percent or 113,486 hectares are classified as forest lands. This consists of primary forests located at the top of high mountains and very steep areas as well as secondary growth forests. Real, on the other hand, has only about 4,745 hectares classified as primary forest and 20,011.15 hectares classified as forest. A total of 125 hectares are under reforestation. The forest lands of General Nakar experienced intensive commercial logging operation despite of a logging ban declared by the government on August 21, 1978.

Quezon is the sixth largest province in the Philippines. It has 40 municipalities and the city of

Lucena. Its population is 1.68 million and grows at 1.8 percent annually. The Sierra Madre Mountain Range runs along the entire length of the province with Mount Banahaw, an active volcano. Other mountain peaks are also found in the Bondoc Peninsula area and in the islands of Polilio, Jomalig and Alabat, with an altitude of about 1,000 feet⁵.

There are 12 protected watershed areas in the province. By and large, the forest areas occupying these protected sites are the remaining forest stands comprising a very low 4 percent forestlands or 398,299 hectares of the total land mass of the province. The forest situation is in a critical stage as manifested in the damage and deaths triggered by the typhoons that struck from November 29 to December 2, 2004.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ¹ Rising from the ruins: Bishop backs total log ban in northern Quezon. INQ7.net December 30, 2004.
- ² Real – 266; General Nakar – 288; Infanta – 106
- ³ 9 big loggers identified: Arroyo dared to cancel permits of companies. Published on page A1 of the Dec. 6, 2004 issue of the Philippine Daily Inquirer.
- ⁴ Let loggers pay for Umiray repair. Published on page A12 of the January 3, 2005 issue of the Philippine Daily Inquirer.
- ⁵ Briefer and interviews provided by PRRM Quezon