

## Northern Luzon holds 1st water convention

Sunday, 19 February 2006

Water is a vital element for our continuing survival. But our water sources and facilities in Northern Luzon are in a critical condition.

The people of the Cordillera mountains and the Cagayan Valley, which cradle the watersheds as well as the headwaters of major rivers, are now confronted with a multitude of issues and problems relating to water. So are the people who occupy the river valleys and coastline of the Ilocos region.

All the major rivers of northern Luzon are afflicted by siltation due to several factors. The longest of these rivers, the Rio Grande de Cagayan, is silted up because intensive logging has denuded the forests and induced excessive soil erosion from slopes and riverbanks upstream. Intensive logging, along with commercial farming, has also deforested the watersheds of the Agno and Abra rivers.

The logging has been done in connection with large mining. Large mining itself is the primary source of the sediments that have silted up the Agno and the Abra.

Some of the sediments that line the Agno and the Abra are toxic in nature. They have come from mine tailings dams installed along the Agno's tributaries and on the Abra itself. Water discharged from these tailings dams is also toxic. It contains the poisons cyanide, arsenic, and mercury, and extremely high concentrations of dissolved heavy metals like copper, zinc, and lead.

The construction of large hydropower or irrigation dams on the Agno, the Rio Chico de Cagayan, and the Magat are another reason for the siltation of these rivers: interfering with the natural flow of the waters, the dams have accumulated sediments in large volumes.

Despite forest denudation, Northern Luzon is still abundant with water sources. Yet hundreds of its communities lack access to safe potable water. Twenty-five percent (25%) of the Cordillera population and 88% of the Ilocos population do not have water piped to their homes but must fetch this from springs or common wells.

The supply of water clean enough for use in agriculture and fisheries is likewise insufficient. In the Cordillera and Ilocos regions, farmers are often unable to produce a second crop of rice because of the lack of irrigation.

Meanwhile, fisherfolk have to grapple with the problem of private enclosure of up to 15% of the Ilocos region's coastal waters by large-scale operators of fishpens and fishcages.

All across northern Luzon, vital water sources used by communities for generations are now under threat of privatization by corporations and wealthy individuals whose main motive is to profit from the exploitation of resources that ought to remain in the public domain.

Increasing urbanization and tourism are taxing these resources and spurring privatization moves. The perennial shortage of water for Baguio city's growing population has impelled the local water district to seek a private bulk water supplier. Benguet Corporation is the sole surviving bidder for the bulk water supply contract. If successful, it will appropriate the water sources of agricultural communities in the towns surrounding Baguio.

Many citizens of Baguio, however, believe that raiding their neighbors' water supplies would be totally unnecessary if their city government and the local water district were to attend properly to the rehabilitation of existing facilities and watersheds.

The foregoing water-related concerns are brought about by the implementation of national policies and programs that promote unregulated resource extraction and privatized delivery of basic public services.

It is in this context that we have organized the 1st Water for the People Northern Luzon Convention. This activity aims to bring together more than 100 representatives of communities, NGOs, the academe, the church, employees of water utility firms, government officials, and other sectors for a three-day seminar on water-related issues. There will be presentations on the water situation of the three regions of Northern Luzon, namely Ilocos, Cagayan, and the Cordillera, following a presentation on the National Water Situation by the Water for All Network-Philippines.

The presentations will be followed by workshops on various themes such as pollution, privatization of water utilities and resources, mining and water, agriculture and fisheries, dams and other hydropower infrastructure, plus water-related disasters. The workshops are expected to generate interactive presentation of experiences and ideas on how water issues ought to be addressed.

The last day of the gathering will focus on advocacy planning and networking with the theme, "Water for all!. We are hoping that this will lead to a sustained Northern Luzon campaign on water issues that will be linked with the national Water for All campaign.

The activity also serves as a follow-through of the National People's Convention on Water held in Quezon City in August this year.

Organizers:

Cordillera Peoples' Alliance

ÁPIT TAKÓ (Alyánsa dagiti Pesánte iti Taéng Kordilyéra)

STARM (Save the Abra River Movement)

STOP-EX (Solidarity of Peasants against Exploitation) Ilocos

IBON Foundation, Inc.

Reference person:

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Chairperson

Cordillera Peoples' Alliance