

MAMASAPANO & RIO TUBA

Almost one month has passed since **Mamasapano**. Up to now, we are wasting precious time and missing opportunities. And we have already squandered precious gains. Yet we are not moving forward. Instead, bitterness, anger, grief, disbelief, divisiveness, hatred, blame, revenge still rule our hearts. And we are witnessing more polarization of our people. Worse, we hear the drums of war. I'm sad.

RIO TUBA --- That reminds me. When Mamasapano happened on January 25 , I was in **Rio Tuba Palawan** ,

. I headed a delegation from the **Philippine Press Institute (PPI)** to take a look at what a mine site looked like and how the community coped. **Nickel Mining Corporation's "JB" BAYLON** and his team arranged the visit.

It's a barangay of **Bataraza** town, about 5 hours of land trip going south of **Puerto Princesa**. By the way, in the opposite direction going north are the famed resorts and havens Palawan is known for worldwide. The southern part hosts mining companies. Rio Tuba is home to **Nickel Mining Corporation** , owned and operated by the company of mining tycoon **Manuel Zamora** and Japan's

Sumitomo

. The

PPI

officials wanted to see for themselves how nickel mining is done and how the operations of a "responsible

" mining company impact on the environment, given the issues and concerns that are usually brought to the attention of the press. What we saw was impressive.

Nickel

, by the way, is a mineral that is used to make stainless materials that don't rust. For instance, nickel is used for airplanes, engines, utensils or cellphones etc..

COMING TO PARADISE -- Before we arrived at the mine site, many of us journalists were bracing ourselves to see wastelands and mined out landscapes considering that Nickel Mining Corp. (**US1.5 billion project**) had been on the ground extracting for about **38 years** since **1977**. But we had a pleasant surprise. Instead of disturbed environments, we saw forests. I remember saying aloud: "I came to visit a mine site. Instead I came to "paradise."

Indeed, instead of gaping mine pits, we saw lush green vegetations and plants and trees and flowers on rehabilitated grounds. Nickel mining does not create kilometer wide craters and bottomless pits as we usually see in gold and copper mines. They scrape the topsoil and go only as deep as

20

meters down to extract the precious ore and then refill and re-contour the ground and restore the green cover with trees and vegetation.

CITY-LIKE AMENITIES -- Life is a breeze in such remote far-away place. Bataraza is almost the last frontier near **Balabac Island** at the tip of elongated Palawan where on a clear night, a promenader can see the shore lights of

Malaysia

from across the sea. The

15,000

or so Rio Tuba residents are living in city-like amenities in the middle of nowhere. Families of mine employees enjoy free electricity and free water. And who would think a

De La Salle

-supervised school operates in such far way place? Named after the late

Leonides Virata,

1,300

pupils are taken cared of by about

56

faculty members. And guess how much each student pays for one whole year: a messly

P300

! Every classroom by the way has hi-tech LCD screens,

IPAD

enabled.

FREE HOSPITAL -- When I walked into the mine hospital, I saw on the bed getting an intravenous antibiotic treatment a fisherman from Balabac Island for an infected swollen foot wounded by a sea urchin days before. The level 1 hospital is manned by **ni**

ne

doctors,

33

nurses and gives free medical services, including medicines and treatment to all, including the IPs with an annual budget of about

P90 million.

It has ultra-sound facilities and can do surgeries with

100-bed

capacity. In serious cases, it can airlift patients to Puerto Princesa with the company's air assets hangared in a private airstrip nearby.

Who would also imagine that about **P1.1 billion** (*yes, billion*) of social development projects for a 5-year period are enjoyed by **11**

impact barangays and

22

other neighboring barangays in the province? Another

P50 million

annual royalties are also given to the IPs, the area being a part of the ancestral domain.

ENVIRONMENT -- Of the total mining tenement area of **5,265 hectares**, only about **600** plus hectares had been "*disturbed*"

" by actual extraction for a period of 38 years of mining operations, and

280

hectares have been rehabilitated and now turning into mini forests. Its tailings storage facility or tailings pond where the waste is deposited has an area of

90

hectares. The feared acid emissions are addressed by massive limestone applications. We personally inspected the filtering and monitoring sites where mine wastewater are recycled and tested before they are released to the waterways.

I recalled how Ms. **GINA LOPEZ**, a strong anti-mining advocate came swinging hard against Rio Tuba mine by showing an aerial video of the mining tenement that had wide reddish-colored spots from the skies several years ago. I wished she would come back and take another shot from the air today. I'll bet, the color would be greenish this time with the ground rehabilitation work as a result.

We were brought to a big pond where fishes were raised from mine waters recycled and cleared of harmful toxicity. The group enjoyed hauling in some fish catch with their bamboo poles with hooks. In my case, I did not catch any fish as I was angling for a sexy mermaid that I was told lived in the depths. She did not bite my bait. So, I had to content myself later looking at two-legged mermaids on dry land instead.

The Rio Tuba visit was pleasant and enjoyable and instructive. I did not know that at that precise same time, that same day, a tragedy was happening in Mamasapano.