

Struggle Endures for Philippine Community Pitted Against Gold Miner

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Community leader Eduardo Ananayo says he wept when heard the Philippine government had renewed its mining agreement with Australian-Canadian company OceanaGold Corporation this past July.

“We felt betrayed by the government who we thought was there to protect us. Why did they side with the foreigners instead of us Indigenous people?” asks the Tawali elder, who leads the Didipio Earth Savers Multi-Purpose Association (DESAMA), one of several organizations protesting the gold and copper mining operation.

OceanaGold holds a “financial or technical assistance agreement” (FTAA) issued by the Philippine government, which allows a wholly foreign-owned mining company to operate in the country. Its previous permit expired in 2019. The successful renewal, which came despite persistent opposition from both residents and the local government, allows the mining firm to continue operations until 2044.

“That will not dampen our resistance,” Ananayo says. “We will not let all our years of struggle go to waste.” Around 4,000 indigenous people living in the villages of Didipio and Alimit, in Kasibu town, Nueva Vizcaya province, have mounted strong opposition to the mine: first against Arimco Mining Corporation, which obtained the initial mining rights in 1994, and then against OceanaGold, which acquired the FTAA in 2006.

OceanaGold’s mine claim spans 27,000 hectares (66,700 acres), straddling the provinces of Nueva Vizcaya and Quirino, some 270 kilometers (170 miles) northeast of the Philippine capital, Manila. The concession is believed to hold 1.41 million ounces of gold and 169,400 tons of copper, enough to keep the mine running for another two decades.

Opponents of the project say it threatens the local water system, which is critical to the

community's survival, to their agricultural livelihoods, and to the surrounding ecosystems.

Immense volumes of water are used to process mineral ores, leading to both water pollution and depletion. In addition, both open-pit and underground mining (which OceanaGold shifted to as of 2015) can disrupt the natural underground water systems that feed springs and creeks.

Protesters also decry what they say is the company's disregard for the land rights of the Indigenous people, and the wide open-pit and abandoned untillable farmlands that they consider a permanent scarring of their natural landscape.

A history of resistance

Since the 1990s, Indigenous peoples in Didipio have resisted attempts to mine their lands.

The area was originally settled by the Indigenous Bugkalot, but was later occupied through peaceful agreements by the Tawali and Ayangan of Ifugao province and the Kalanguya and Ibaloy of Benguet in the 1950s. This means that although they belong to recognized Indigenous communities, the residents are not regarded as ancestral domain holders. This precludes them from asserting the need for a free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) process under the Philippine Indigenous Peoples Rights Act.

With a semitemperate weather, Didipio was an ideal place for rice and vegetable agriculture because of the abundance of water coming from numerous springs and creeks from the forest, Ananayo says.

The Dinauyan and Surong rivers, which cut across the village, were not only abundant with fish but also nuggets of gold, which locals traditionally pan, Ananayo recalls. "After tending our farms, we would go pan for gold which we sell to buy other necessities."

But in the early 2000s, OceanaGold pushed through with its operation, despite resistance from the community and the municipal and provincial government. To begin excavating its open-pit mine, OceanaGold demolished at least 187 houses in June 2008. According to a 2011 report by the Philippine Commission on Human Rights (CHR), a constitutionally mandated body, this demolition was violent and was carried out without the legally required permits or relocation and compensation agreements. The evictions, the commission said, also amounted to a violation of the Indigenous community's right to "manifest their culture and identity."

"Some people were still cooking breakfast while others were still sleeping when Oceana [OceanaGold] bulldozed their houses," recalls Myrna Duyan, also a resident of Didipio. Company security officers even shot a man for trying to save his neighbor's house, she says.



With a semitemperate weather, Didipio was an ideal place for rice and vegetable agriculture because of the abundance of water coming from numerous springs and creeks from the Kasibu forest. Image courtesy of Karlston Lapniten.



OceanaGold's mine in Didipio, Philippines. Image courtesy of Karlston Lapniten.

Following its investigation, the CHR recommended the government “consider the probable withdrawal” of OceanaGold’s FTAA due to gross violations of human rights related to the 2008 demolition. But no official action was taken.

Instead, by 2013 OceanaGold had completely demolished Dinkidi Hill, inverting it into a vast

open-pit mine. Since then, Duyan says, the water systems across Didipio started to recede significantly.

As of October 2021, Duyan says that at least a dozen water pumps and springs have dried up in the community immediately surrounding the mine, forcing residents to travel at least a mile (1.6 kilometers) to fetch water for household use.

Other residents have given up tracts of farmland, as there is not enough irrigation to sustain crops. Duyan says her own father was forced to abandon their farm in Upper Bakbakan, a district in Didipio, when water became totally scarce in 2017.

The area where the water is drying up is part of the headwaters of the Addalam River, a major tributary of the Cagayan River, the longest in the Philippines. The Addalam irrigates rice paddies in downstream Isabela and Cagayan provinces, known as the rice-producing heartland of the northern Philippines.

The proximity of the mine to the community is also worrisome, since the center of the open pit is just 1 km (0.6 mi) from the edge of the community. When OceanaGold conducts rock blasting underground, the earth trembles as if an earthquake happened, Ananayo says.

Cracks can be seen in the walls and floors of many houses, as well as the community school, which the villagers attribute to the blasting.

“With their continuing operations, this will surely worsen. Nearby communities should also expect losing their waters,” Ananayo says.

Gold panners have also been stopped from panning in their traditional spots, Duyan says. Even those far downstream of the mine have had to stop after experiencing skin irritation from the river water, a phenomenon they attribute to the chemicals seeping from OceanaGold’s tailings dam.

At one time, Ananayo says, the company hired a “military man” who destroyed the residents’ sluice boxes along the river and threatened to hurt those who planned to resume panning.

“They accuse us of stealing from them by panning, but this is our land! How can we steal something we own?” Ananayo says.

OceanaGold did not grant Mongabay’s request for an interview, and instead directed Mongabay via email to visit its website “for more information.”



Residents forming a human barricade along the road, 2019. Image courtesy of Kalikasan PNE.

People's barricades

Following the expiration of OceanaGold's FTAA in June 2019, residents of Didipio set up "people's barricades" along the gravel roads leading to both of the mine site's entrances, halting the entry of OceanaGold's fuel tankers and service vehicles.

Ananayo says they resorted to such means after numerous petitions and letters asking government agencies and national officials to intervene resulted in nothing. (The regional office of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, which is responsible for regulating mining, did not respond to Mongabay's request for comments.)

The opposition became even more emboldened with Nueva Vizcaya Governor Carlos Padilla's vocal support: "[OceanaGold] no longer have the right to operate," Padilla [told local media](#) in July 2019. "If they have no right to the land, then they have no right to continue enriching themselves from the land."

Ananayo says the barricades have been the site of altercations between villagers and workers trying to bring in fuel and other materials for the mine's operations. Violence escalated on April 6, 2020, when three oil tankers escorted by at least 100 policemen forced their way into the mine site from the northeast road.

Residents immediately gathered to form a human barricade along the road. Some sat down, others lay down on the gravel road, and others still tried to go under the tanker trucks. But the police, armed with riot shields and sticks, beat the protesters and shoved them to the side of the road. Witnesses said other policemen stood guard with their heavy rifles.

Duyan was struck on her foot, resulting in the loss of her toenails, while Ananayo was hit in

the face. Rolando Pulido, at the time the chair of DESAMA, was stripped down to his underwear, beaten, and detained overnight at the police station.

Trauma from the event has led other residents to “lie low” for fear of an even greater impunity, Duyan says. But she says she remains undeterred. “Of course, we fear for our lives, but we will not let it conquer us. God is watching over us.”



An abandoned barricade post in Didipio. Image courtesy of Karlston Lapniten.



In April 2020, while the mine's permit was suspended, police dispersed protesters and escorted a convoy of oil tankers to the mining site. Image courtesy of Karlston Lapniten.

Pandemic restrictions

With the rise in the number of coronavirus cases in the Philippines this year, protesters abandoned their barricade posts in compliance with local health protocols and regulations. They even avoided holding physical meetings to avoid the risk of local transmission, Duyan says.

It was during this period, when lockdowns and economic distress hampered the community's ability to organize, that OceanaGold's contract was renewed. "We are already suffering a lot from the effects of COVID and they included yet another burden on top," Duyan says.

Duyan says OceanaGold has taken advantage of the restrictions imposed by the government to curb the pandemic. With no hindrance, its vehicles can now freely go in and out of the mine site, Duyan says. Hundreds of people from outside Didipio also frequently enter the community to apply for jobs after the company posted announcements for job openings. "Now we also have health security issues, since each of those people could be carriers of COVID," Duyan says.

COVID-19 restrictions have also halted consultations and visits from NGOs and advocacy groups who are helping the community in their struggle against the mine. Ananayo says the community relies heavily on organizations like the Legal Rights and Natural Resources Center and Alyansa Tigil Mina (Alliance to Stop Mining) to provide pro bono assistance in legal actions and in understanding court and administrative processes.

"We've lost hope on government agencies because we have not seen them advocate our cause," Ananayo says.

Information relayed to DESAMA by sympathetic OceanaGold employees indicates that the company will resume operations in December. This October, Duyan says, seven passenger vans loaded with blasting materials were seen entering the well-guarded mine compound.



With COVID-19 restrictions keeping the residents from going out to protest, OceanaGold's vehicles now freely go in and out of the mine site. Image courtesy of Karlston Lapniten.

Call for help

With general elections coming up in May 2022, Duyan says the stance of politicians on large-scale mining will decide whom they will campaign and vote for.

"We will use this election to vote officials who truly champion our cause and will help us stop Oceana's operations," she says.

Following the inaction of the government in response to the illegal demolition of houses in 2008 and the violent dispersal of protesters in April 2020, Ananayo says protesting residents feel that even state forces and government agencies have become instruments to further oppress them. OceanaGold, Ananyo adds, has become well-versed in burnishing its image outside Didipio, with many local news outlets portraying the company as a responsible miner.

Ananayo says the community needs any help they can muster, even from outside the country. "I hope people will notice our voices here in Didipio," he says. "We settled here peacefully long before mining prospectors came. We will fight for our lands."

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