

Philippines Land Scandal

by Peter Poole

PRESIDENT Fidel Ramos of the Philippines has endorsed a Mining Code giving companies freedom to devastate tribal lands. In its desperation to attract foreign investors, the debt-ridden Philippines government has abandoned any pretence of caring about tribal land rights.

The Code offers some of the most favourable terms to corporate investors found anywhere in the world. Multinationals were even asked to help draft the Code. But affected communities - mostly tribal peoples who live on mineral-rich land - were not consulted.

There are 10 million tribal people in the Philippines, nearly 15% of the total population. The Igorot, from the Cordillera region, north of Luzon, are noted for their beautiful and intricate rice terraces. These could now be destroyed by the filth and pollution of open cast mines.

Open cast mining is already a threat to health. Breathing difficulties have doubled among the Igorot since Benguet Corporation's new sites were installed. Water is too polluted for washing in and noxious fumes escape from processing plants. Commercially, the most important minerals are gold, copper and chromite. Cyanide and other poisonous chemicals are involved in gold extraction. Many of the miners are tribal peoples who are forced by poverty to work long and dangerous hours underground.

The Philippines government has repeatedly shown that it has no respect for tribal peoples' land rights. In 1991, for instance, the Small Scale Mining Act did not recognise their prior rights to ancestral lands. This was despite the fact that in 1987, when the constitution was revised, ancestral land rights were officially recognised. Before the Mining Code, foreign control of mining companies was limited to 40%. Now

100% foreign ownership is allowed. Companies also have the right to displace and resettle people within their 'concessionary areas' and environmental regulations are disastrously lax. Profit is now more important than human life.

The Igorot have long-established mining practices which are completely different from those of the invading multinationals. Mineral resources are communally controlled. The right to dig a tunnel is granted by the elders. No dangerous chemicals are used and the gold ore is shared in the community.

Up to 100,000 of the one million Igorot gain significant benefits and supplements to their livelihood from this small-scale mining — many more than are employed by the companies. Small-scale mining has proved environmentally sound and far more sustainable than the 'modern' wage slavery imposed by foreign companies. In its eagerness to sell itself to foreign investors, the Philippines government seems to have

forgotten not only its responsibility to its citizens but the wording of its own constitution. Any attempt to transform the 1987 recognition of land rights from a paper document into a human reality has been blocked by Congress. Meanwhile, numerous laws which directly contradict this constitutional commitment have passed swiftly onto the statute books.

Despite the constitution, and despite the proven importance of small-scale mining to tribal peoples, the government — colluding with international 'development' institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund - has turned its back on sustainable development projects and strongly backed the policy of economic growth through free access and foreign investment. In a sense this is not surprising, given that the Philippines has a massive \$39 billion debt. But the Igorot and other tribal peoples did not make that debt, so why should they be paying the cruellest price?

The London-based Survival International has stepped up its campaign to protect the interests of indigenous peoples.

In South Africa, they are highlighting the plight of the only known surviving "Bushman" group which is claiming back the land in a national park from which they were driven in the 1950s under the apartheid regime. The 200 Bushmen hope to reclaim their land without going to court.

In Kenya, efforts are being made to help the Maasai to retain the land on which they depend which they risk losing because of a fraud. Government officials who were supposed to safeguard the land have used a legal procedure to assign the best tracts to outsiders.

In Brazil, representatives of the Makuxi Indians launched a protest about the theft of land and the persistent abuse of their rights by ranchers, miners, government officials and the army. Representatives took their protests to London and then flew to Rome for a private audience with the Pope.

In Newfoundland, nine Innu Indians from Labrador were sentenced to a term in prison because they refused to pay fines for protesting on their own land. The Indians had protested against low-level flights by NATO aircraft over their territory which they claimed threatened their best hunting grounds.

Survival International is the premier campaigning organisation in the world on behalf of peoples who have been deprived of their traditional rights to land. Their address: 11-15, Emerald St., London WC1N 3QL.