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STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND INITIATIVES SERVICE



Pushback vs DENR chief

BIZ BUZZ



It's been a long while since the legitimate mining industry in this country has had a break, especially with government regulators seemingly eager to tighten the noose around miners that are operating legally while being either powerless or uninterested in clamping down on illegal mining operations that have been raking it in.

But all that has changed, apparently, with large local mining firms now feeling optimistic about their prospects given the new leadership at the Department of the Environment and Natural Resources (DENR).

Biz Buzz hears that mining firms—especially those that make up the Chamber of Mines of the Philippines—are excited to start collaborating with the industry's regulators, especially with the new "science-based approach" that Environment Secretary **Toni Yulo-Loyzaga** has implemented at the DENR.

Loyzaga's policy initiatives are creating waves in the industry, including those that leverage off new technologies to help the government enforce environmental laws and protect the country's natural resources.

For example, she's a big advocate of using near-real time satellite imaging technology to monitor the country's shrinking forest cover, as well as to moni-

tor reforestation efforts, including those being promised and implemented by mining companies engaged in open pit mining.

In the past, this kind of monitoring was done only by forest rangers of which there are too few in the DENR's employ, given its limited operating budget of only P24 billion in total for the coming fiscal year—a far cry from what the department needs to faithfully fulfil its mandate.

"One forest ranger is assigned to guard thousands of hectares of land," Loyzaga said, explaining that it was simply impossible for one person (who isn't even armed) to protect all those forests against exploitation.

And illegal mining activities—which earn billions but don't contribute to the national coffers by way of taxes and royalties—are in her crosshairs, while creating an environment that is favorable to miners who comply faithfully with the law. "She looks at the data dispassionately and does not let her emotions get in the way," said one mining industry official, clearly relieved to be able to talk rationally with the head regulator for a change.

All these reforms aren't happening smoothly, however. Biz Buzz hears that Loyzaga is encountering a lot of "pushback" from entrenched interests in the DENR and its sub-agencies, many of whom are seeing their ... uhm ... "livelihoods" affected by her new way of doing things.

All this is making industry

observers ask: Will these reforms take root? Will the secretary last? *Abangan!* —**DAXIM L. LUCAS**

Converge brings high-speed Wi-Fi to Naia

Busy travelers waiting to board their flights no longer have to worry about missing social media posts or important work e-mail as fiber broadband provider Converge ICT Solutions Inc. led by **Dennis Anthony Uy** will roll out 1-gigabit per second fiber connectivity as part of its free Wi-Fi project at the country's gateways.

The Converge co-founder and CEO tells BizBuzz that intermittent and slow Wi-Fi has always been a nagging complaint among travelers and Converge decided to do something about it.

Converge thus committed to roll out the free Wi-Fi program last year with the signing of the memorandum of agreement with the Department of Transportation and various agencies including the Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines and the Manila International Airport Authority.

The listed fiber company has made good on that promise as starting today, travelers going through terminal 4 of the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (Naia) will enjoy faster Wi-Fi connection at speeds up to 1 Gbps and free for two hours. Soon, Converge will extend the service to other major airports such as those in Cebu and Davao. —**TINA AR-CEO-DUMLAO** INQ



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E. Samar seeks P133M from mining companies

BORONGAN CITY—The provincial government of Eastern Samar is demanding payment of P133 million on extracted minerals of mining companies in Homonhon Island, Guiuan. The assessment on the extracted minerals was jointly conducted by the provincial government's treasury, assessor, and legal offices.

The tax liability of Cambayas Mining Corp is at P96,578,000, covering 2012 to 2016; the tax liability for Techiron Resources Inc. is P22,560,687.52, covering periods 2017 up to 2021; that of Emir Mineral Resources Corp. is P12,148,255.68, covering 2017 and 2022; and it is P2,580,000 for Mt. Sinai Mining Exploration & Development Corp., for the year 2013.

If these companies fail to settle these amounts, the provincial government will be forced to seize their properties to satisfy their tax debts. These taxes on extracted minerals are different from taxes on machineries and equipment being used by mining companies. The province is still in the process of determining the assessed value of their tax liabilities on their machineries and equipment. These real property taxes are also different from excise taxes being

paid by these mining companies to the national government. However, the province has yet to receive its share from the companies' excise taxes, according to a statement issued Monday by the provincial governor's office.

The assessment on extracted minerals by mining companies was based on the Ore Transport Permit (OTP) issued by the Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB). The companies have extracted chromite in Brgy. Casuguran, Homonhon Island and are therefore subject to real property taxation under the Local Government Code of 1991, the Manual on Real Property Appraisal and Assessment Operations, and Provincial Ordinance No. 09-09 series of 2009.

The four companies have been notified by the Provincial Treasurer's Office through a letter and a tax bill containing details of their tax dues as well as penalties for non-payment for the various years of mining operations in the island.

All mining companies in Eastern Samar must strictly comply with all the mining laws not only on taxes but more important, on environmental and social protection laws, the provincial government said.



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EYES WIDE OPEN

IRIS GONZALES

Transforming an island

An hour's flight from Manila, this sprawling odd-shaped patch of earth in Antique is full of surprises and irony.

Where, for instance, can you find hectares and hectares of pitch black, smoking and scorching dry coal in some parts and turquoise blue waters, a fine white sand beach and fresh air on the other end?

This is Semirara Island, which is part of the municipality of Caluya in the province of Antique in the Western Visayas region.

The island itself has an area of some 5,000 hectares and is home to the country's richest coal reserves.

It is indeed the country's biggest coal mine and yet deep into its forests, past wild bushes, across its dusty and maze-like terrain, reached best by a hulking Land Rover, is paradise.

This is what I saw the first time I visited Semirara six years ago.

In late May, I joined tycoon Isidro Consunji for another visit to the island. It was a quick day trip when he hosted a group of visiting investors.

As I was when I first visited Semirara in 2017, I found myself in awe again of this island of black gold the second time around.

But more so now because I saw the rehabilitation work that Consunji-led Semirara Mining & Power Corp. (SMPC) has been doing. SMPC has the exclusive rights to explore, extract and develop the island, which is the largest coal mine in the country

Rehabilitation

SMPC embarked on a P2.92-billion rehabilitation program for the Panian Mine, one of the coal mines in the island which, after 16 years, had been totally mined out.

As instructed by the Department of Energy (DOE) under then Secretary Alfonso Cusi, the mines had to be rehabilitated to repair the land disturbed by mining activities or make it even better than the barren pastureland of wild bushes and weeds that it was before mining operations started more than a decade ago.

The first step in rehabilitating the mine was to refill it to bring it back to its normal elevation.

This was as daunting as it could be and it took years to complete. I imagine a process similar to reclamation.

By June 2019, or three years since the mine closed, South Panian had been completely refilled.

In all, Panian had a mine life of 16 years and generated P12.7 billion in royalties for the Philippine government and SMPC host communities.

Of the total amount, P7.6 billion went to the national government while the municipality of Caluya and Barangay Semirara received P2.3 billion and P1.8 billion, respectively. P1 billion went to the province of Antique.

After refilling, it was time to start planting trees on the now promising new forest land.

March 2020 marked the beginning of the reforestation of the former mine pit and this was what I saw during my recent visit last May.



By August 2021, SMPC had planted 439,647 trees in South Panian, consisting of beach agoho, balete, molave, fire tree, narra and bamboo.

When I was there, I was invited to plant a molave tree and I fervently hope it survives and thrives. I even saw birds in the newly reforested area.

Speaking of birds, I also saw the aviary which SMPC, in partnership with the DOE, established as the Semirara Biodiversity Conservation Center (SBCC). The locals call it The Aviary.

It is dedicated to rehabilitating, protecting and restoring biodiversity in the island.

Here, SMPC extended its efforts from propagating endangered marine species to preserving terrestrial wildlife and promoting sustainable land use.

Pavel Hospodarsky, a Czech bird specialist and consultant with almost three decades of experience in designing and implementing wildlife conservation projects in several countries, gladly took me around the aviary. I saw birds of different colors – beautiful, elegant and alive.

Somewhere in this labyrinthine land, there's also a hatchery that propagates seven endangered species of giant clams and other marine life.

The late Angel Alcala, a marine biologist and National Scientist, helped SMPC establish the hatchery, together with two other national scientists.

That the giant clams can thrive in the waters of Semirara is telling. After all, these endangered marine treasures survive only in a safe and unpolluted marine environment and thus, are a significant indicator for determining the health of coral reefs in the island.

SMPC has bred at least 151,638 giant clams, proving that its coal mining operations have no detrimental impact on the aquatic ecosystem of Semirara Island.

A model for legacy mines

It's good that Semirara is rehabilitating the coal pits. It should indeed be a model for legacy mines. It is a pragmatic move that recognizes the negative impact of mining activities on the environment.

Some say the end of the coal era is here. We have yet to see if the alternative energy sources, mainly renewable energy, would be affordable enough to power the country's electricity requirements.

For sure, coal's negative impact on the environment cannot be denied, but it served its purpose at a time when there was no alternative yet.

Moving forward, however, whether it is coal or other resources, I hope that the government will make sure that all big businesses that mine the country's natural resources will rehabilitate the communities, islands or the mountains whose resources they've extracted.

As for Semirara Island, the once sleepy, isolated and nearly forgotten island transformed and developed over time because of SMPC and its coal operations. It is what it is.

Time will tell what happens next in this enigmatic island of black gold.

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Gomez urges DENR to act on massive pollution in Ormoc Bay

LEYTE Rep. Richard I. Gomez wants an update from the Department of Natural Resources (DENR) to address the massive pollution of water, soil, and air resources in Palompon, Leyte caused by the discharge of chicken solid wastes into the waters of the Albuera-Tinag-an stream system that drains into Ormoc Bay.

Gomez has earlier urged the House Committee on Environment and

Natural Resources to recommend the filing of criminal and administrative charges before the Office of the Ombudsman against Palompon Mayor Ramon Oñate and his wife Lourdes for gross violation of the country's land and environmental laws.

He has likewise recommended that the House committee "come up with a report and a conclusion" that the Oñate couple, along with complicit employees

of the DENR regional office, "be charged" for violation of the Forestry Act and environmental management laws for pollution.

"What immediate actions has the DENR taken to prevent further destruction of the environment in Palompon? I have called its attention to the offenses of the Oñate couple and the DBSN Farms Agriventures Corporation. The House Committee on

Environment and Natural Resources has started an inquiry into the firm's illegal activities. I hope the DENR has done something to address the issues I have raised," Gomez said.

Gomez said "the DENR leadership should not keep a deaf ear and a blind eye to the environmental crimes happening in Palompon and Albuera. It should act fast to stop the destruction of the municipalities' water, soil and air resources."



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Revolutionize waste management through circular economy—Villar

By Macon Ramos-Araneta

SENATOR Cynthia Villar has urged the public to grab the opportunity to revolutionize waste management through the circular economy approach.

Speaking at the Coffee Club Forum sponsored by Business Mirror at the Bellevue Manila, Villar said one of these initiatives was called the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR).

As chairperson of the Senate Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Climate Change, Villar authored RA No. 11898 or the Extended Producer Responsibility Act of 2022.

“The EPR Act mandates large enterprises to take responsibility for the proper and effective recovery, recycling, or

disposal of the plastic packaging used on their products after they have been sold and used by consumers,” Villar said.

“The goal is to cut down non-environmentally friendly packaging, boost recycling, and promote effective waste recovery to mitigate environmental pollution,” she added.

According to the senator, the EPR law presents an opportunity to “dramatically reduce plastic waste and facilitate our transition toward a circular economy.”

She said implementation of the EPR Act “is a step in the right direction.”

The senator noted that long before the concept of ‘circular economy’ became popular, “its principles were already at the heart of their waste management practices.



Stricter ban in Mayon's danger zone sought

By CET DEMATERA

LEGAZPI CITY – Due to the anticipated extended eruption of Mayon Volcano, entry into the six-kilometer-radius permanent danger zone must be strictly prohibited to avoid untoward incidents, the Office of Civil Defense (OCD) in Bicol said yesterday.

Claudio Yucot, OCD-Bicol director, said he would ask government troopers manning checkpoints at the entry and exit points leading to Mayon's permanent danger zone to strictly enforce the ban, especially with the volcano manifesting a high level of unrest for almost a month now.

"We cannot take chances. We have to strictly enforce the no-entry policy inside the six-kilometer permanent danger zone. I will personally advise our men in uniform to strictly enforce the no-entry policy in the danger zone," Yucot said.

Reports gathered by The STAR indicated that some evacuees have been sneaking into the six-kilometer danger zone, especially when they hear reports that the volcano's condition at the moment would not lead to a strong or dangerous eruption.

Eugene Escobar, officer-in-charge of the Albay public safety and emergency management office, said the Apsemo has warned the evacuees against returning to their houses in the prohibited area.

"We are also receiving reports that some evacuees are expressing intention to return home if Mayon's abnormal but not violent eruption would become prolonged. We rejected their requests," Escobar said.

In the past 24 hours, the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (Phivolcs) recorded a "very slow" but continuous lava effusion accompanied by lava flows that stretched up to 2,700 meters at the gullies of Mi-isi in Daraga, Bonga in Legazpi and Basud in Sto. Domingo.

Phivolcs recorded during the same monitoring period two dome-collapse py-

roclastic density currents that lasted two minutes, two lava front PDCs that generated a 200-meter-high plume, 295 rockfall events, three volcanic earthquakes, sulfur dioxide emission that averaged 962 tons a day and plume emissions that rose to 500 meters above the crater.

Paul Alanis, Phivolcs resident volcanologist at the Lignon Hill Observatory in this city, said Mayon's abnormal signs continued to fluctuate in the past few days.

"But overall, Mayon's condition remains under the parameters of Alert Level 3," Alanis said, adding that entry into the six-kilometer danger zone should remain prohibited.

Alanis likened Mayon to a patient in the intensive care unit, whose condition neither improves nor deteriorates.

He said the past 24-hour monitoring activity detected lava flow extending 2.7 kilometers long.

Alanis advised residents living within the seven and eight-kilometer radius of the volcano to prepare for possible evacuation. – With Bella Cariaso, Michael Punongbayan


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Mayon's collapsed lava front produces 200-meter-high light brown plume

By ELLALYN DE VERA-RUIZ

Mayon Volcano's ongoing eruption led to another collapse of its lava front and longer pyroclastic flows that produced a light brown plume on Monday, July 3, the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (Phivolcs) said.

Phivolcs monitored two pyroclastic density currents (PDCs) caused by the collapse of Mayon's lava front, which resulted in the formation of a 200-meter-high light brown plume.

Two PDCs triggered by the lava dome collapse, 295 rockfall events, and three volcanic earthquakes were also recorded in the past 24 hours.

The Mayon Volcano's status has been elevated twice in the past month, first to level 2 on June 5 and then to level 3 on June 8 due to "increasing unrest."

"In the past 24-hour period, very slow effusion of lava from the summit crater of Mayon Volcano continued to feed lava flows and col- ▶ 4

Mayon's collapsed lava front produces 200-meter-high light brown plume 1◀

lapsed debris on the Mi-isi (south) and Bonga (southeastern) gullies as well as rockfall and PDCs on these [Mi-isi and Bonga] gullies and the Basud (eastern) gullies," Phivolcs said.

Lava flows from Mayon have advanced approximately 2.7 kilometers and 1.3 kilometers on the Mi-isi and Bonga gullies, respectively, while collapsed debris has reached a distance of four kilometers from the crater.

A "moderate" amount of sulfur dioxide was also constantly emitted from the Mayon crater, producing a 500-meter-high steam-laden

plume that drifted west and west-northwestward.

'Intensified' magmatic unrest persists

Phivolcs said Mayon Volcano is still at Alert Level 3 due to the presence of magma at the crater and the possibility of a "hazardous eruption within weeks or even days."

The evacuation of residents within the six-kilometer permanent danger zone is strongly advised because of the risk of PDCs, lava flows, rockfalls, and other volcanic hazards.

In addition, Phivolcs advised communities to maintain increased vigilance against PDCs, lahars and sediment-laden stream flows along channels draining the volcano edifice, as heavy rainfall could cause channel-confined lahars and sediment-laden stream flows.

Pilots were also asked to avoid flying close to the volcano because ash from a sudden eruption may pose hazards to aircraft.

According to Phivolcs, communities on the southern side of Mayon Volcano may most likely experience ash fall events based on the current wind pattern.



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THE EXPONENT OF PHILIPPINE PROGRESS
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MANILA BULLETIN
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VOLCANIC LIGHTNING — A gigantic bolt of thunder is captured in this image taken by photographer Edwin Martinez as Mayon Volcano electrified the evening sky with ash plumes and lava on Friday, June 30, 2023.



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Editor
Maria Edralyn L. Benedicto

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER
REGIONS

CREEPING DANGER Lava, rocks and other debris creep down the slopes of Mayon Volcano on July 2, as seen in this photo taken at Legazpi Boulevard in Legazpi City, Albay. —PHOTO CONTRIBUTED BY DENNIS MIRABUENO

LIGAO CITY, GUINOBATAN TOWN AFFECTED

MAYON ASHFALL BLANKETS PARTS OF ALBAY

By Ma. April Mier- Manjares
@MaAprilMierINQ

LEGAZPI CITY—As Mt. Mayon continued to display an increasing level of restiveness, the volcano on Monday spewed ash affecting two localities in Albay province, with brownish plumes created by pyroclastic density currents (PDC) reaching up to 500 meters.

The ashfall was recorded in Ligao City, which prompted students of Ligao National High School to seek cover, and also in Guinobatan town, according to local authorities.

Ybeth Datur, a teacher at that school, said the ashfall started at 9:50 a.m. and lasted for about four minutes. “The [senior high school students] stopped [their activity] and immediately went to buildings to seek cover. The moderate rains washed the ashes at noon,”

Datur said in an online chat.

Residents in the neighboring town of Guinobatan also reported experiencing a similar ashfall incident.

Paul Karson Alanis, resident volcanologist of the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (Phivolcs) in Legazpi, said the PDC, or fast-moving avalanches of volcanic ash, rock and gases that created plumes of ash, were carried by the wind to the western part of the volcano, facing Guinobatan and Ligao City, instead of moving to the Basud gully in Sto. Domingo town.

Similar events

He said the event that started at 7:20 a.m. on Monday was similar to the previous records of PDC monitored in Mi-isi gully in Daraga town and Bonga gully in Legazpi City.

“We cannot really compare, but based on the signal in our instrument, we can see that it’s almost the same [with the previous PDC],” Alanis said in a phone interview on Monday.

In its Monday bulletin, Phivolcs said the Mayon Volcano Network recorded 295 rockfall events, three volcanic earthquakes, two dome-collapsed PDC that lasted two minutes and another two lava front collapsed PDC that generated a 200-m-high light brown plume.

The lava flow reached 2.7 kilometers in Mi-isi gully and 1.3 km in Bonga gully.

The volcano remained on alert level 3, which meant that it is currently in a relatively high level of unrest as magma is at the crater and a hazardous eruption would be possible within weeks or even days. **INQ**



Maguindanao Sur under calamity state amid floods

Disaster response execs say 223,000 people in 12 towns displaced by prolonged rains

By **Edwin O. Fernandez**
@InqNational

COTABATO CITY—Maguindanao del Sur has been placed under a state of calamity due to floods that inundated at least 12 of its 24 towns since last week, displacing 223,000 people.

Gov. Bai Mariam Sangki Mangudadatu had signed the resolution that was passed by the provincial board on Friday declaring the entire province under a state of calamity due to flooding, according to Ameer Jehad Ambolodto, head of the Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office (PDRRMO).

The declaration would pave the way for the release of the calamity fund that would allow the provincial government to provide relief to affected families and mobilize resources for rehabilitation efforts and to mitigate the impact of flooding, said Ambolodto, quoting the governor.

Ambolodto said the PDRRMO was still assessing the extent of the damage to the infrastructure and agricultur-



YET TO SUBSIDE Floodwater has yet to recede at the municipal hall compound in Pagalungan, Maguindanao del Sur, in this photo taken on July 1. —PAGALUNGAN MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

al crops damaged by floods spawned by weather disturbances that affected Mindanao in the past two weeks.

Liguasan marshland

So far, 44,722 families or about 223,610 individuals had been affected by floods that submerged communities surrounding the Liguasan marshland, Ambolodto said on Monday.

The hard-hit towns were Shariff Saydona Mustapha,

Montawal, Mamasapano, Pagalungan, Datu Salibo, Sultan sa Barongis, Mangudatu, Gen. SK Pendatun, Datu Saudi Ampatuan, Datu Piang, Ampatuan and Paglat.

The Liguasan marsh has been the catch basin of floodwaters from the provinces of Sultan Kudarat, South Cotabato, Cotabato and Bukidnon.

“Even if it is not raining here, we are still flooded because water from upstream passes through our towns through various tributaries,” said Benjamin Alip, municipal disaster officer of Pagalungan, the most affected town.

“Since the rivers are [already] heavily silted, the water finds its course through the communities, including our town hall compound,” Alip said.

Twelve villages of Pagalungan town lay submerged underwater, he added.

In Pagalungan’s adjacent town of Pikit in Cotabato province, more than P50 million worth of infrastructure and agricultural crops were also damaged by the floods. INQ



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Japan set to pour Fukushima waste into Pacific, irking China

By SHOKO ODA & ISABEL REYNOLDS

JAPAN is set to win approval to discharge more than a million cubic meters of treated water from the Fukushima nuclear disaster site into the Pacific Ocean, a contentious plan that's soured ties with neighbors including China.

The International Atomic Energy Agency's Director General Rafael Grossi will visit Japan from Tuesday to deliver a final report on the safety of the process and meet with officials including Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi. A domestic nuclear regulator is also set to issue a crucial assessment.

Both studies are poised to give backing to Tokyo Electric Power Co. to begin releasing the water—equivalent in volume to about 500 Olympic-size swimming pools—

into the sea, a step that's needed to allow full decommissioning of the Fukushima site following the 2011 earthquake and tsunami that triggered the world's worst atomic disaster since Chernobyl.

Japan has assured other nations that the release of the water is safe, is in line with standard industry practice and that it's necessary, because about 1,000 storage tanks at Fukushima will hit capacity early in 2024. Other countries with nuclear plants already safely discharge similar diluted waste offshore, according to the IAEA.

It also comes as Japan joins a wider global reappraisal of nuclear power, with several nations seeking to boost energy self-sufficiency by reviving idled reactors, adding plants or investing in new technology. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida

is aiming to build on improving domestic support for the energy source, and Japan's efforts to complete the closure of the Fukushima site are seen as crucial in inspiring confidence.

Despite Japan's diplomatic push, the discharge plan is complicating some global relationships.

The ocean is "not Japan's private sewer," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said last month, warning the proposed release carries risks for the country's neighbors and Pacific Island nations. Wang called it a selfish move "that puts the common interests of all humanity in jeopardy."

Japanese cosmetics brands have been targeted by a viral campaign tied to the issue that spread unproven safety allegations on Chinese social media platforms. In South Korea,

demand for sea salt has rocketed as consumers stockpile the condiment amid worries the release of wastewater could taint future supplies.

While the central government in Seoul hasn't pushed back against Japan's plans publicly, a survey by the Yomiuri newspaper and South Korea's Hankook Ilbo conducted in May found 84 percent of respondents opposed the discharge. The nation's opposition Democratic Party led a demonstration on Saturday, which it claimed was attended by an estimated 100,000 people, according to Yonhap News.

The Pacific Islands Forum, a group of 18 nations including Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Australia, has urged Japan to consider alternatives and called for additional discussions on the risks. *With assistance from Ben Westcott, Heesu Lee and Andrew Janes / Bloomberg*



'Climate change spells terrifying future'

GENEVA: Climate change threatens to deliver a "truly terrifying" dystopian future of hunger and suffering, the United Nations' human rights chief warned Monday.

Volker Turk slammed world leaders for only thinking of the short term while dealing with the climate crisis.

Turk told a UN Human Rights Council debate on the right to food that extreme weather

events were wiping out crops, herds and ecosystems, making it impossible for communities to rebuild and support themselves.

"More than 828 million people faced hunger in 2021. And climate change is projected to place

up to 80 million more people at risk of hunger by the middle of this century," said Turk.

"Our environment is burning. It's melting. It's flooding. It's depleting. It's drying. It's dying," he said, evoking a "dystopian future." "Addressing climate change is a human rights issue... there is still time to act. But that time is now," he said.

The 2015 Paris Agreement saw countries agree to cap global

warming at "well below" two degrees Celsius above average levels measured between 1850 and 1900 — and 1.5 C if possible. The global mean temperature in 2022 was 1.15 C above the 1850-1900 average.

On current policy trends, the planet will be 2.8 C warmer by the end of the century, according to the UN's IPCC climate science advisory panel.

"We must not deliver this

future of hunger and suffering to our children, and their children. And we don't have to," Volk said.

"We, the generation with the most powerful technological tools in history, have the capacity to change it." Turk said world leaders "perform the choreography of deciding to act and promising to act and then get stuck in the short term." He called for an end to

"senseless subsidies" of the fossil fuel industry, and said the Dubai COP28 climate summit in November and December needed to be the "decisive game-changer that we so badly need." Turk urged the world to "shun the green-washers" as well as those who cast doubt on climate science, driven by their own greed.

The Human Rights Council's 53rd session runs until July 14. **AFP**



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Climate change makes wildfires and smoke worse. Scientists call it the 'new abnormal'

BY SETH BORENSTEIN & MELINA WALLING
The Associated Press

IT was a smell that invoked a memory. Both for Emily Kuchlbauer in North Carolina and Ryan Bomba in Chicago. It was smoke from wildfires, the odor of an increasingly hot and occasionally on-fire world.

Kuchlbauer had flashbacks to the surprise of soot coating her car three years ago when she was a recent college graduate in San Diego. Bomba had déjà vu from San Francisco, where the air was so thick with smoke people had to mask up. They figured they left wildfire worries behind in California, but a Canada that's burning from sea to warming sea brought one of the more visceral effects of climate change home to places that once seemed immune.

"It's been very apocalyptic feeling, because in California the dialogue is like, 'Oh, it's normal. This is just what happens on the West Coast,' but it's very much not normal here," Kuchlbauer said.

As Earth's climate continues to change from heat-trapping gases spewed into the air, ever fewer people are out of reach from the billowing and deadly fingers of wildfire smoke, scientists say. Already wildfires are consuming three times more of the United States and Canada each year than in the 1980s and studies predict fire and smoke to worsen.

While many people exposed to bad air may be asking themselves if this is a "new normal," several scientists told The Associated Press they specifically reject any such idea because the phrase makes it sound like the world has changed to a new and steady pattern of extreme events.

"Is this a new normal? No, it's a new abnormal." University of Pennsylvania climate scientist Michael Mann said. "It continues to get worse. If we continue to warm the planet, we don't settle into some new state. It's an ever-moving baseline of worse and worse."

It's so bad that perhaps the term "wildfire" also needs to be rethought, suggested Woodwell Climate Research Center senior scientist Jennifer Francis.

"We can't really call them wildfires anymore," Francis said. "To some extent they're just not, they're not wild. They're not natural anymore. We are just making them more intense."

Several scientists told the AP that the problem of smoke and wildfires will progressively worsen until the world significantly reduces greenhouse gas emissions, which has not happened despite years of international negotiations and lofty goals.

Fires in North America are generally getting worse, burning more land. Even before July, traditionally the busiest fire month for the country, Canada has set a record for most area burned with 31,432 square miles (81,409 square kilometers), which is nearly 15 percent higher than the old record.

"A year like this could happen with or without climate change, but warming temperatures just



HAZE is visible in New York City from the Empire State Building observatory on June 7, 2023. As smoky as the summer has been so far, scientists say it will likely be worse in future years because of climate change. AP/WIDEWORLD

made it a lot more probable," said A. Park Williams, a UCLA bioclimatologist who studies fire and water. "We're seeing, especially across the West, big increases in smoke exposure and reduction in air quality that are attributable to increase in fire activity."

Numerous studies have linked climate change to increases in North American fires because global warming is increasing extreme weather, especially drought and mostly in the West.

As the atmosphere dries, it sucks moisture out of plants, creating more fuel that burns easier, faster and with greater intensity. Then you add more lightning strikes from more storms, some of which are dry lightning strikes, said Canadian fire scientist Mike Flannigan at Thompson Rivers University in British Columbia. Fire seasons are getting longer, starting earlier and lasting later because of warmer weather, he said.

"We have to learn to live with fire and smoke, that's the new reality," Flannigan said.

Ronak Bhatia, who moved from California to Illinois for college in 2018 and now lives in Chicago, said at first it seemed like a joke: wildfire smoke following him and

his friends from the West Coast. But if it continues, it will no longer be as funny.

"It makes you think about climate change and also how it essentially could affect, you know, anywhere," Bhatia said. "It's not just the California problem or Australia problem. It's kind of an everywhere problem."

Wildfires in the US on average now burn about 12,000 square miles (31,000 square kilometers) yearly, about the size of Maryland. From 1983 to 1987, when the National Interagency Fire Center started keeping statistics, only about 3,300 square miles (8,546 square kilometers) burned annually.

During the past five years, including a record low 2020, Canada has averaged 12,279 square miles (31,803 square kilometers) burned, which is three and a half times larger than the 1983 to 1987 average.

The type of fires seen this year in western Canada are in amounts scientists and computer models predicted for the 2030s and 2040s. And eastern Canada, where it rains more often, wasn't supposed to see occasional fire years like this until the mid 21st century, Flannigan said.

If the Canadian east is burning, that means eventually, and probably sooner than researchers thought, eastern US states will also, Flannigan said. He and Williams pointed to devastating fires in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, that killed 14 people in 2016 during a brief drought in the East.

America burned much more in the past, but that's because people didn't try to stop fires and they were less of a threat. The West used to have larger and regular fires until the mid-19th century, with more land settlement and then the US government trying to douse every fire after the great 1910 Yellowstone fire, Williams said.

Since about the 1950s, America pretty much got wildfires down to a minimum, but that hasn't been the case since about 2000.

"We thought we had it under control, but we don't," Williams said. "The climate changed so much that we lost control of it."

The warmer the Arctic gets and the more snow and ice melt there—the Arctic is warming three times faster than the rest of Earth—the differences in the summer between Arctic and mid-latitudes get smaller. That allows the jet stream of air high above the ground to meander and get stuck, prolonging bouts of bad weather, Mann and Francis said. Other scientists say they are waiting for more evidence on the impact of bouts of stuck weather.

A new study published on June 23 links a stuck weather pattern to reduced North American snow cover in the spring.

For people exposed to nasty air from wildfire smoke, increasing threats to health are part of the new reality.

Wildfires expose about 44 million people per year worldwide to unhealthy air, causing about 677,000 deaths annually with almost 39 percent of them children, according to a 2021 study out of the United Kingdom.

One study that looked at a dozen

years of wildfire smoke exposure in Washington state showed a 1 percent all-ages increase in the odds of non-traumatic death the same day as the smoke hit the area and 2 percent for the day after. Risk of respiratory deaths jumped 14 percent and even more, 35 percent, for adults ages 45 to 64.

Based on peer-reviewed studies, the Health Effects Institute estimated that smoke's chief pollutant caused 4 million deaths worldwide and nearly 48,000 deaths in the US in 2019.

The tiny particles making up a main pollutant of wildfire smoke, called PM2.5, are just the right size to embed deep in the lungs and absorb into the blood. But while their size has garnered attention, their composition also matters, said Kris Ebi, a University of Washington climate and health scientist.

"There is emerging evidence that the toxicity of wildfire smoke PM2.5 is more toxic than what comes out of tailpipes," Ebi said.

A cascade of health effects may become a growing problem in the wake of wildfires, including downwind from the source, said Ed Avol, professor emeritus at the Keck School of Medicine at University of Southern California.

Beyond irritated eyes and scratchy throats, breathing in wildfire smoke also can create long-term issues all over the body. Avol said those include respiratory effects including asthma and COPD, as well as impacts on heart, brain and kidney function.

"In the longer term, climate change and unfortunately wildfire smoke is not going away because we really haven't done that much quick enough to make a difference," Avol said, adding that while people can take steps like masking up or using air filters to try to protect themselves, we are ultimately "behind the curve here in terms of responding to it."

Borenstein reported from Washington and Walling from Chicago.



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Deep sea mining permits may be coming soon. What are they and what might happen?

By VICTORIA MILNO
The Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia—The International Seabed Authority—the United Nations body that regulates the world's ocean floor—is preparing to resume negotiations that could open the international seabed for mining, including for materials critical for the green energy transition.

Yearslong negotiations are reaching a critical point where the authority will soon need to begin accepting mining permit applications, adding to worries over the potential impacts on sparsely researched marine ecosystems and habitats of the deep sea.

Here's a look at what deep sea mining is, why some companies and countries are applying for permits to carry it out and why environmental activists are raising concerns.

What is deep sea mining?

DEEP sea mining involves removing mineral deposits and metals from the ocean's seabed. There are three types of such mining: taking deposit-rich polymetallic nodules off the ocean floor, mining massive seafloor sulphide deposits and stripping cobalt crusts from rock.

These nodules, deposits and crusts contain materials, such as nickel, rare earths, cobalt and

more, that are needed for batteries and other materials used in tapping renewable energy and also for everyday technology like cell-phones and computers.

Engineering and technology used for deep sea mining are still evolving. Some companies are looking to vacuum materials from seafloor using massive pumps. Others are developing artificial intelligence-based technology that would teach deep sea robots how to pluck nodules from the floor. Some are looking to use advanced machines that could mine materials off side of huge underwater mountains and volcanoes.

Companies and governments view these as strategically important resources that will be needed as onshore reserves are depleted and demand continues to rise.

How is deep sea mining regulated now?

COUNTRIES manage their own maritime territory and exclusive economic zones, while the high seas and the international ocean floor are governed by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas. It is considered to apply to states regardless of whether or not they have signed or ratified it. Under the treaty, the seabed and its mineral resources are considered the "common heritage



THE sun rises over fishing boats in the Atlantic Ocean on September 8, 2022, off of Kennebunkport, Maine. The United Nations body that regulates the world's ocean floor is preparing to resume negotiations in July 2023 that could open the international seabed for mining, including for materials vital for the green energy transition. AP/ROBERT BRUNY

of mankind" that must be managed in a way that protects the interests of humanity through the sharing of economic benefits, support for marine scientific research, and protecting marine environments.

Mining companies interested in deep sea exploitation are partnering with countries to help them get exploration licenses.

More than 30 exploration licenses have been issued so far, with activity mostly focused in an area called the Clarion-Clipperton Fracture Zone, which spans 1.7 million square miles (4.5 million square kilometers) between Hawaii and Mexico.

Why is there pressure on the ISA to establish regulations now?

IN 2021 the Pacific island nation of Nauru—in partnership with mining company Nauru Ocean Resources Inc., a wholly owned subsidiary of Canada-based The Metals Company—applied to the ISA to exploit minerals in a specified deep sea area.

That triggered a clause of the UN treaty that requires the ISA to complete regulations governing deep sea exploitation by July 2023. If no regulations are finalized, Nauru can submit an application to conduct the mining without any governing regulations.

Other countries and private

companies can start applying for provisional licenses if the UN body fails to approve a set of rules and regulations by July 9. Experts say it's unlikely it will since the process will likely take several years.

What are the environmental concerns?

ONLY a small part of the deep seabed has been explored and conservationists worry that ecosystems will be damaged by mining, especially without any environmental protocols.

Damage from mining can include noise, vibration and light pollution, as well as possible leaks and spills of fuels and other chemicals used in the mining process.

Sediment plumes from some mining processes are a major concern. Once valuable materials are extracted, slurry sediment plumes are sometimes pumped back into the sea. That can harm filter-feeding species like corals and sponges, and could smother or otherwise interfere with some creatures.

The full extent of implications for deep sea ecosystems is unclear, but scientists have warned that biodiversity loss is inevitable and potentially irreversible.

"We're constantly finding new stuff and it's a little bit premature to start mining the deep sea

when we don't really understand the biology, the environments, the ecosystems or anything else," said Christopher Kelley, a biologist with research expertise in deep sea ecology.

What's next?

THE ISA's Legal and Technical Commission, which oversees the development of deep sea mining regulations, will meet in early July to discuss the yet-to-be mining code draft.

The earliest that mining under ISA regulations could begin is 2026. Applications for mining must be considered and environmental impact assessments need to be carried out.

In the meantime, some companies—such as Google, Samsung, BMW and others—have backed the World Wildlife Fund's call to pledge to avoid using minerals that have been mined from the planet's oceans. More than a dozen countries—including France, Germany and several Pacific Island nations—have officially called for a ban, pause or moratorium on deep sea mining at least until environmental safeguards are in place, although it's unclear how many other countries support such mining. Other countries, such as Norway, are proposing opening their waters to mining.