

## The Marcopper Disaster of March 24, 1996

(After ADB and the Environment [2004] and Marcopper Social Impact Assessment [1996])

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**Marinduque** was briefly catapulted into global prominence when on March 24, 1996, the massive spill of mine tailings from the **Marcopper Mining Corporation (Marcopper)** wrought havoc on the small-island province in central Philippines. (The island measures 959 sq. km and is the 14th largest body of land in the Philippine Archipelago.)

**Marinduque/Marcopper** had become a *cause célèbre*, providing an excellent case for cause-oriented groups for it had all the right elements: 1) the choking of once-pristine rivers with sand and silt; 2) pollution of marine waters; 3) violation of environmental laws; 4) the profit-making activities of a transnational corporation; 5) association with past abuses of the **Marcos dictatorship**; 6) destruction of the economic means and way of life of poor rural dwellers; and 7) concerns about the role of government in administering

environmental regulations.

Established in 1964, **Marcopper** started open-pit mining operations in 1969 at Santa Cruz, in the small-island province of **Marinduque**. At its peak, the copper-gold-silver producer was the third largest mining company in the country, with a 30,000-ton of run-of-mine (ROM) output per day. This translated into 10.8 million tons ROM output per year.

A Canadian multinational mining company, **Placer Dome Inc.**, owned nearly 40% of the total shareholding and was in effect largest single investor, although the **Philippine Government** controlled 49%, and the rest were public shares.

But subsequent revelation was that the late **President Marcos** himself, through a number of cover companies, owned about half of the **Marcopper** mine. (After *Christian Aid and PIPLinks*, p.6)

On March 24, 1996 **Marcopper** had an accidental release of tailings into the environment from the mine. The concrete plug in the tunnel (from the Tapian Pit to the Makulapnit River) located at the base of the tailings pit burst, and the rock enveloping this plug was fractured, triggering the escape of about 1.6 million cubic meters of mine tailings at the rate of five to ten cubic meters per second. Said volume of mine tailings was equivalent to more than three million tons of hazardous waste.

Prior to this accident, the Tapian Pit was used for tailings storage of the company's adjacent San Antonio Mine, as the Tapian copper ore body was depleted in 1992. With a surface area of 60 hectares, the open pit disgorged 220 million tons of earth and rocks from which one million tons of the copper metal was mined from 1969-1991.

The tailings spillage rendered the 27-kilometer Boac River and its twin Makulapnit River biologically dead and further silted the coastal and estuarine areas near the Boac River delta. At the height of the disaster, five villages had to be evacuated, and an estimated 20,000 people in the 42 villages along the two rivers and the estuary were affected.

It was a big scandal and embarrassment to the government and the mining industry. **Marcopper** stopped operations on the very same day. After two months, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) withdrew the Company's Certificate of Compliance effectively shutting down the mining operation.

A post-disaster technical report of the United Nations (UN) mission concluded that although the mine tailings had high concentration of the heavy metals copper, chromium, zinc and lead, it posed relatively little environmental risk as toxicity was not present. However, the people's negative reactions and fears about the tailings spill were not dispelled.

Although it tried wash off its hands from the disaster, **Placer Dome Inc.** was obviously among the shareholders the only one with mining expertise. The Canadian mining firm had no choice but to coordinate with **Marcopper** to remedy the situation. It reportedly spent millions of dollars cleaning up the Boac-Makulapnit Rivers, and eventually succeeded in reducing the flow by 99% to an intermittent discharge of

clear groundwater. But thereafter, in 1997 **Placer Dome** divested itself of all business interests in that hapless company.

The DENR had reported that after several years of contamination, the rivers were slowly returning to normal. But the devastation that **Marcopper** had caused was deemed irreversible in the public mind. It alerted people all over the country to the disastrous environmental impact that has so frequently been the legacy of large-scale mining in the Philippines.

**Marcopper** is the worst, but by no means the only, environmental disaster in Philippine mining history. It happened just one year after the 1995 Mining Act  intended to boost foreign investment in the industry was passed. All the disaster boosted, however, was the widespread community opposition to mining that still remains today.

Ref.: <http://www.prrm.org/publications/gmo2/vd.htm>

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