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Behind Paywall

They Took On the Philippines' Powerful Mining Interests, and Are Paying With Their Lives

Lindsay Fendt Tuesday, Oct. 16, 2018

COMPOSTELA VALLEY, MINDANAO, Philippines—It was just after dawn on the southern island of Mindanao, but police officers already had a call to respond to. Winding their way through the scenic green mountains of the Compostela Valley, they approached the scene of the crime, a patch of dirt on the side of a highway. But when they got there, they found no witnesses, and no sign of the perpetrator. All they could see was a sack of corn, its contents spilled across the road, stained red with blood.

The blood belonged to Jimmy Saypan, a local farmer. He had left his house early that morning in October 2016 to go work on his vegetable farm in the next town over. His wife, Ruby, had watched his motorcycle disappear down the driveway only to come sputtering back moments later with Jimmy hunched over the handlebars. He was clutching his stomach as blood oozed out of a bullet wound in his gut.

At the time, Saypan was the leader of the Compostela Farmers Association, or CFA, a group of some 500 farmers opposing a large-scale mining exploration project in the valley. The group held rallies and circulated petitions that protested government permits and challenged one of the most powerful companies in the Philippines. Under Saypan's leadership, the CFA had become one of the country's most prominent anti-mining groups, a thorn in the side of mining companies and pro-mining politicians.

As the CFA's reputation grew, Saypan started to feel as though he had a target on his back. Military men were coming by the house. Gripping their machine

guns, they would warn that his protesting could get him into trouble. “Of course there were threats, but we were still surprised something actually happened,” Ruby Saypan says.

Jimmy Saypan died in a hospital bed 24 hours after he was shot. The only thing he managed to tell Ruby was that the shooter had been on a blue motorcycle waiting for him at the end of the driveway. Little came of the murder investigation—the police never made an arrest—but the blood-spattered corn seeds at the crime scene became a much-discussed detail among other Compostela farmers, a gruesome symbol of the dangers they faced as long as valuable minerals remained buried under their land.

Extrajudicial killings are nothing new in the Philippines. Since the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, who was president for 20 years beginning in the mid-1960s, the Philippine government has been known for carrying out arbitrary arrests and summary executions of political rivals and critics. The country’s current president, Rodrigo Duterte, has publicly encouraged the killings of suspected drug users and dealers in the streets without trial; Human Rights Watch estimates that Duterte’s war on drugs has resulted in more than **12,000 deaths**. But while these killings have received widespread international attention, a coinciding uptick in assassinations targeting environmentalists has flown mostly under the radar.

Saypan’s murder was just one of 109 reported killings of environmental activists and land defenders in the Philippines between 2015 and 2017, according to human rights groups. Global Witness, a London-based NGO that tracks environmentalist murders, reported that 43 of those murders occurred in 2017 alone, the highest annual death toll for any Asian country ever recorded.

Before their deaths, most of the victims were active in protesting mining, logging, coal or agribusiness operations. In many cases, the environmental destruction was happening on the victim’s own land or ancestral domain.

Masked men carried out most of the killings in motorcycle drive-by shootings, making it difficult to identify the culprits. No arrests were made in any of the murders. Still, experts and human rights groups contend that the military, private corporate security outfits and local politicians are likely behind the violence, and Global Witness found signs of military involvement in 56 percent of last year’s murders. Officials with the Philippine government’s Mining and Geosciences Bureau, the national agency that authorizes mining projects, canceled a scheduled interview for this story and declined to comment.

“The motivation of the killing of the activists is difficult to ferret out,” says William Holden, a geographer at the University of Calgary who has studied the murders

of activists in the Philippines. “But two things are happening for sure: You have rich and powerful people who want things done, and you have poor people who get in their way.”

Erasing a Community

Saypan’s anti-mining struggle began five years before he was killed. In April 2011, the government granted Agusan Petroleum and Minerals Corporation, or AgPet, an exploration permit to search for gold, copper and silver in the Compostela Valley.

The permit covered over 30,000 acres, including farms and small-scale mining operations that belonged to CFA members. Saypan and the other CFA leaders worried that if AgPet struck gold, the company would build a mine and take over their land.

The CFA’s plight quickly got the attention of the Philippine media, and the group drew fierce support from human rights and environmental groups. By 2015, as AgPet was preparing to bring in more equipment for exploration, the CFA had won over the local government in Compostela. That March, the municipal council issued a resolution asking the Mines and Geosciences Bureau to cancel AgPet’s exploration permit.

Instead of heeding the council’s suggestion, the bureau canceled the council’s resolution in May and ordered the military to enforce AgPet’s “unhampered exploration activities.”



A man uses a shovel to search for flecks of gold in the bed of the Kingking River, Pantukan, Philippines (Lindsay Fendt).

Military intervention in support of extractive industries is common in the Philippines. Officially, the military can break up protests and provide security for company officials. Unofficially, the military can do whatever it deems necessary to move a project forward. According to human rights groups and protesters, this means using intimidation and violence to clear out entire towns and villages to make way for mining companies.

The decision by the Mines and Geosciences Bureau left CFA members with two options: They could back down, or they could try to stop AgPet by force. A week after the bureau issued its order, AgPet workers arrived in Compostela with drilling equipment. Hundreds of CFA members were there to meet them, blocking the only road in.

The barricade stalled the project, but trouble followed for the protesters. A month later, the army fired on the house of Bello Tindasan, a CFA leader. Tindasan wasn't home, but his wife and two of his children were forced to hunker on the floor for 20 minutes while bullets ripped through the building. According to a [news report](#) published at the time of the shooting, the army said members of a communist rebel group were hiding out in Tindasan's house.

The shooting was only the beginning. The military set up checkpoints and made house calls, threatening protesters with retribution. The CFA nevertheless continued its protests.

In 2016, CFA members started turning up dead. Jimmy Saypan's murder was the first of nine. Though human rights groups insist that military personnel were behind the deaths, none of the killings has been solved.

AgPet's exploration permit expired in 2017, but the company could renew it at any time. Though the conflict over mining in the valley has died down over the past year, many surviving CFA members are still dealing with the consequences of their activism.

At the Compostela Valley Jail in Tagum City, a giant poster of Jesus and a rusty barbed-wire fence are the first two things that greet visitors. When I arrived one morning in March, a heated basketball game was underway in the courtyard. Inmates in pink jerseys jostled on the court while Justin Bieber's "Baby" blared over speakers in the background. Dotted with palm trees, bamboo huts and guards in shorts and polo shirts, the small compound could be mistaken for a budget beach resort if it weren't for the men with machine guns lining the perimeter.

A guard led me to one of the small shacks where I waited for a few minutes before two women in matching navy prison scrubs shuffled in. The inmates, Jhona Rose Madrid, 40, and Alicia Tindasan, the 62-year-old wife of Bello Tindasan, are both members of the CFA. They were arrested in July 2017 along

with two other CFA members and their driver while on their way from Compostela to a school in the neighboring town.

The group was stopped at a military checkpoint while heading to the annual “brigada,” a tradition in the Philippines when people clean the school before classes start. They presented all their paperwork, but the officers held them for more than three hours, separating the group from their motorcycle and belongings. As the sun began to set, Madrid said a man in a black mask showed up. He pointed a gun at them and told them to lie face-down on the ground.

They stayed like that, with the masked man screaming over them, for what Madrid said felt like hours. When they were finally allowed to stand, one of the officers placed a sack of rice in front of them. He said they had pulled the rice from among the other groceries that Tindasan had bought for the brigada. They opened the sack and pulled out a small box that Madrid said she didn’t recognize. The military officers insisted it was a bomb.

Later that night, police arrested the entire group and put them in the small jailhouse in the town of Compostela, where they were held for more than a month. Finally, on Aug. 25, they were formally charged with possessing an explosive device and transferred to the jail in Tagum City.

It’s now been almost a year since Madrid has seen her kids. The trip to Tagum City is too expensive for them, and she worries that her family might run into problems if they hit a checkpoint. The others have struggled as well. Tindasan, who is older than the other prisoners, has found it difficult to sleep on the jail’s concrete floor, and this lack of sleep has made her sick for most of her time there. Meanwhile, the driver, Alexir Mata, laments the fact that his life has been put on hold. He had gotten engaged just before his arrest, but with a huge case backlog and no arraignment set, his wedding is now delayed indefinitely.

The government’s bid to silence the farmers’ anti-mining movement in Compostela has been largely successful. On the streets of the town, there is little evidence that it ever existed.

Shortly after Saypan’s death, the Armed Forces of the Philippines disbanded all farmers’ organizations in the province and reorganized them under military leadership. When I asked why farming groups had been placed under military control, officials with the Department of Agriculture said Compostela was a “red zone” for communist activity and that the farmers needed to be monitored.

The military has had this amount of control since May 2017, when Mindanao was put under martial law after fighters loyal to the self-styled Islamic State seized Marawi City, located in the northwest part of the island. Though most of the Islamist militants are on the west side of the island, the military also maintains a strong presence in eastern Mindanao and in the Compostela Valley. The

government says these areas face a growing threat from a communist group known as the New People's Army.

Human rights groups say the increased presence of the military has led to rampant abuses across Mindanao. Both Madrid and Tindasan say they have received threats from the military ever since the CFA orchestrated its barricade in 2015, but that the intimidation intensified in 2016 after a bombing in Davao City, Mindanao's capital. The military has accused many CFA members of belonging to the New People's Army, or NPA, even though the CFA has no official affiliation with it.



Signs from a rally supporting the military that were left outside the municipality building in Compostela, Philippines (Lindsay Fendt).

While the NPA had more than 20,000 members at its peak in the 1980s, its power has dwindled since then. Since 2014, the Philippine military has said the NPA's fighters total no more than 3,900. But official reports on the army's operations seem to contradict its own data. For example, in March, the armed forces stated that 4,356 NPA supporters had surrendered within the first three months of the year. In most cases, these surrenders involved large numbers of purported fighters, often hundreds at a time.

On a Tuesday in March, I witnessed the aftermath of one such surrender. A group of NPA supporters and their families gathered in the bleachers of a dilapidated gym at the town hall in Compostela, ready to renounce their communist pasts and declare allegiance to the Philippines. Soldiers with machine guns circled on the balcony, overseeing the group of about 100 people. According to a municipal official, the event marked the completion of a three-day re-education workshop, in which former NPA members were "taught to trust the military." As they crossed the stage, each graduate was given a plate of food and a sack of rice.

The Communist Party of the Philippines, which supports the NPA, has pointed to events like this one as evidence that the Philippine military deceives, forces or bribes innocent people to "surrender" after identifying themselves as NPA fighters. Those critical of the military's operations in Mindanao say this practice, known as "red-tagging," is the reason that the armed forces often reports more NPA surrenders than there are NPA fighters. Military officials have denied these claims, saying the surrenders also include NPA sympathizers who may not be

included in their other estimates.

According to government officials, many former CFA members were among the alleged NPA sympathizers at the March workshop. Those who didn't surrender were added to a military watchlist.

The Treasure

On a hot, humid morning in March, four men plodded through the Kingking River in the coastal town of Pantukan, located in the southernmost corner of the Compostela Valley. Plunging their shovels into the riverbed, the men threw dirt into sifters that lined the shore. Each shake of the sifters' wooden frames revealed tiny gold specks that shimmered in the sunlight. Nabbing even a small nugget could have yielded an entire month's salary for some of the men, while a larger one could have bought a new motorcycle.

For as long as people have inhabited the Philippines, they have sought to capture the archipelago's mineral riches. Archeologists have found gold and copper jewelry dated as far back as the 10th century. But while panning and tunnel mining have long been common in the Philippines, industrial mining didn't take off until officials simplified the investment process with the 1995 Mining Act.

Today, the Mining and Geosciences Bureau estimates that the country's untapped reserves of gold, nickel and other metals are worth as much as \$1.4 trillion, and a vast portion of this unexploited treasure trove sits cradled in the Compostela Valley. In places like Pantukan, a mining expansion over the past few decades has completely transformed the economy.

Locals say Pantukan contained little more than a highway sign and a cock-fighting ring before the mining companies started coming in the mid-1990s. These days, the town is a hub for shipping and other satellite services, and the municipality ranks among Mindanao's wealthiest. Though the remote town is still a far cry from a metropolis, it's now the only place for miles where you can find a hotel that doesn't charge by the hour.

On a Sunday night, I took a trip down to Pantukan's pier in the cab of a brand new moto-tricycle. My driver, Lito, told me that he had the mining boom to thank for his new ride; he had earned the money to buy it through work at the new hotel and more lucrative driving gigs. The families who had gathered at the pier to watch the sunset seemed to have enjoyed similar good fortune. New cars and motorcycles lined the dock and teenagers thumbed away on high-end smartphones. The pier itself is little more than a concrete outcropping, but it too is slated for an upgrade. With partial funding from mining companies as well as local banana plantations, the municipality plans to convert the pier into a port for passenger boats to carry people from Pantukan across the bay to the capital in Davao City.

While the new transportation line is billed as a positive development for Pantukan, it would also greatly benefit the mining and agricultural companies providing the funding for it. The new boat route would provide a direct line between Pantukan and the airport in Davao City, a mandatory stop for the executives flying in to check on their companies' investments.

It's an example of how the local benefits of mining operations pale in comparison to those bestowed upon mining officials. Broadly speaking, while the transport and processing of minerals and agricultural products keeps some money in Mindanao, the vast majority flies back on the plane to Manila.

The same rule applies to Mindanao's economy writ large. According to a 2017 report from the World Bank, most of the island's economic growth has come from corporate plantations, logging, mining and heavy manufacturing. These sectors require large amounts of investment, but they don't generate many jobs. Between 2012 and 2017, mining contributed on average only 0.7 percent to the country's GDP and represented 0.6 percent of employment. Despite one of the highest economic growth rates in the country, Mindanao has the highest rate of poverty in the Philippines and the lowest per capita income. Moreover, the communities that must cope with the negative effects of mining—like pollution and displacement—often receive few of the benefits.

Despite this wealth disparity, many in the Philippines view protesters and environmental activists as anti-development troublemakers. "The people who oppose the mines are not from Pantukan," Lito says when I ask about those who have spoken out against mining operations. "They are just people who like to oppose things, people who love to rally."



A farmer pushes dried rice into piles to be sacked, Compostela, Philippines (Lindsay Fendt).

This sense of frustration with protesters is no doubt shared by mining executives, who have profited from an increasingly free rein in the Philippines in recent years. Though the Philippine Constitution bans foreign-owned corporations, heavy pressure from foreign investors and entities like the World Bank led government officials to add a loophole to the 1995 Mining Act. That change allowed foreign corporations to enter the country's mining, energy and agriculture sectors. Controversial projects in those sectors have led to violence across the country, but uncovering their true financial backers and where they come from is complicated.

The Philippines has some of the least transparent financial laws in the world. According to the 2018 Financial Secrecy Index, produced by the Tax Justice Network, the Philippines has a 100 percent secrecy score in company ownership and partnership transparency. This means that the investors in a controversial project in the Philippines can legally shield their identities behind layers of shell companies, avoiding public scrutiny. While development institutions such as the World Bank are typically more transparent about where they put their money, their investments through intermediaries can often go unnoticed and in some cases are practically impossible to trace.

In 2013, the World Bank pledged to limit its financing of coal power projects across the world, citing coal's climate impacts. Bank officials said they would only invest in coal in situations where there were no feasible energy alternatives.

After the announcement, coal slowly began to disappear from the World Bank's extensive investment portfolio. But four years later, a group known as the Philippine Movement for Climate Justice accused the World Bank's private lending arm, the International Finance Corporation, of funding 19 new coal projects in the Philippines. The coal investments were not made directly through the IFC, but through the Rizal Commercial Banking Corporation, or RCBC, a bank in which the World Bank's lending arm has invested approximately \$250 million since 2011. The IFC now owns around 7 percent of RCBC, making it one of the company's largest stakeholders.

In a complaint to the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman, an independent office that investigates claims against the IFC, the activists said the Corporation's equity stake in RCBC gave it influence over company operations. They argued that the IFC was obligated to use this power to direct the company not to invest in coal. The IFC did not reply to several emails seeking comment on the case.

The Compliance Advisor Ombudsman has opened an investigation to determine if the IFC violated its own environmental and social standards. But regardless of whether the IFC is found culpable or not, there is evidence that the RCBC's coal investments have hurt communities.

According to the complainants, none of the communities were consulted or

informed about the RCBC's coal projects, and some indigenous groups were displaced. Several complainants said they experienced respiratory and skin problems after coal-fired plants started up, and others said their communities suffered environmental impacts that affected their ability to fish or farm.

There have also been casualties. Gloria Capitan, 57, was a leader in the Coal-Free Bataan Movement, which directly opposed three coal projects funded by RCBC in the province of Bataan, outside Manila. Capitan became active in the group after the municipal health department shut down the bar she owned because of dust blowing in from a nearby coal stockpile. After numerous unsuccessful complaints to have the stockpile shut down, she joined the movement and began organizing against coal projects throughout the region.

According to other members of Coal-Free Bataan, Capitan quickly became one of the group's most enthusiastic members. She attended every protest and hosted an annual holiday party, and in 2016 she decided to run for the municipal council on an anti-coal platform. While her stance on coal won her support from those affected by coal operations, it also brought her enemies. Strange men started showing up at the gate to her family's property at night. An acquaintance, an anti-crime organizer in the community, began regularly calling her to discourage her from protesting. During one of his calls he told Capitan that he "didn't want to see her covered in soil."

On July 1, 2016, several weeks after that cryptic phone call, Capitan was singing karaoke with two of her small grandchildren in her bar. Her son, Mark, was several yards away in his house. He was listening to his mother sing when the music was interrupted by the bang of gunfire. He ran over to the bar and found Capitan on the floor with several bullets buried in her chest.

Efforts to revive her were unsuccessful. Mark could only watch as the perpetrators, two masked men, sped away on a motorcycle.



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Fleeing Violence, the Philippines' Anti-Mining Activists Are Trapped in a 'Waiting Game'

Lindsay Fendt Thursday, Oct. 18, 2018



A farmer surveys his crops at a hideout in a banana plantation on the island of Mindanao, Philippines (Lindsay Fendt).

Editor's note: This is the second installment of a two-part series on killings of environmental activists in the Philippines.

MINDANAO, Philippines—On a secluded banana plantation on the Philippine island of Mindanao, nearly 400 people pass each night in tents, huts and makeshift dormitories. They bathe in the plantation's irrigation ditches, surrounded by blue bags of pesticides that have fallen from the banana plants. The entire camp subsists on rice donated from a local farmers' association. The plantation's residents almost never leave their hideout. It may be the only place they are truly safe.

Many of the residents are members of organizations like the Compostela

Farmers Association, a peasant group that is fighting the expansion of large-scale mining in the Compostela Valley. Others are indigenous people who say they were forced off their land to make way for mining and other projects. All of them say they were harassed by the Philippine military and that the threats reached a point where they needed to flee for their lives.

Conflicts over natural resources and land have become commonplace in the Philippines, which has one of the highest murder rates for environmentalists and land activists in the world. According to Global Witness, a London-based NGO that tracks violence against environmentalists, there were 43 such homicides in 2017 alone, the highest annual death toll ever recorded for an Asian country. Rather than risk their lives, many threatened environmentalists are now choosing to flee their homes.

For Rogelio Madrid, 54, the tipping point came after he received his fourth request to report to a military outpost for an interview. Madrid is married to Jhona Madrid, one of four [CFA members jailed](#) in Tagum City. As an active CFA member himself, Madrid feared that if he presented himself to the military, he might get arrested, leaving his young children alone. So instead of appearing for the interview, he and his kids packed up some clothes and headed to the banana plantation.

The entire Madrid family is now in limbo, waiting for their circumstances to change. Rogelio hopes that the petitions to the government and the courts from the CFA's allies will eventually get Jhona released, but until then he's grateful that he has a place to stay. The plantation's high fences give him some piece of mind.

"At least here I can sleep," he says. "Back home I was always too nervous that the military was going to come busting in at night."

For the Madrids and the rest of the CFA, the trouble with the military began in 2011 after they began protesting against the Agusan Petroleum and Minerals Corporation, or AgPet. The company had obtained an exploration permit encompassing more than 30,000 acres of land in Compostela, including farms and small-scale mining operations that belonged to CFA members.

Though the CFA's protests won support from human rights and environmental groups, the farmers' organization was no match for the mining interests. AgPet is owned by the same parent company and run by the same CEO as San Miguel Corp., one of the largest companies in the Philippines. The company's permit came with the full support of the national government, which ordered the military to "assist" AgPet in carrying out its exploration.

Following the military order, CFA members reported harassment both by men in uniform and by unknown men in masks. From 2015 to 2017, the height of the

CFA's resistance campaign, four CFA members were arrested on trumped-up charges and six were killed by masked men on motorcycles. This past August, three more CFA members were killed. Hundreds more were accused by the military of being members of the New People's Army, or NPA, an armed communist insurgent group.

Ocampo Adlawan was among the CFA members accused of being part of the NPA. Knowing he would be arrested, he fled Compostela earlier this year and went into hiding. These days, he sits on a bench near his cot in the plantation's old banana-packing house, smoking a long hand-rolled cigarette and sorrowfully stroking his grey goatee.

Before he went into hiding, Adlawan was one of the area's datu, or chiefs. He says that AgPet officials approached him and asked him to sign a document granting permission for mineral exploration on tribal land. Under both Philippine and international law, the free and prior informed consent of indigenous people is required before any development can happen in their territory, but Adlawan refused to sign.

"We chose to protect the environment, because otherwise they will remove the mountain," Adlawan says. "The mountain is our market, our hospital, our home, our everything."

After he made clear he would not cooperate, Adlawan says the military ordered him to surrender and confess to being a member of the NPA. When he refused, he says they put a bounty worth 1 million pesos, or around \$19,000, on his head.

Aside from cases that result in killings or arrests, it is difficult to verify intimidation claims from CFA members interviewed for this story. Allegations that the military and masked assailants acted on behalf of AgPet also cannot be confirmed, and AgPet officials did not respond to inquiries for this story. But one thing is certain: The CFA no longer operates in Compostela. Those who have not fled to sites like the banana plantation are either dead or locked up.

The United Church of Christ's Haran Mission House, a church-sponsored shelter in Davao City, is one of the locations sheltering indigenous people who have fled violence on their land. A cramped outdoor pavilion alternately serves as their schoolhouse, cafeteria and living room. When I visited one day in March, it was also their funeral parlor.

A long white coffin sat on a table near the back of the common space. It was adorned with flowers, a few scattered candles and a framed photograph of a serious-looking young man. The same face looked up through a glass panel covering the coffin, unsmiling and lifeless. Though some people stopped to light

a candle or glance at the body, the wake didn't seem to disturb the bustling rhythm of the 300-person camp. After all, the presence of a coffin isn't that unusual.

The dead man was Garito Malibato, 23, a member of the indigenous Manobo ethnic group. He had been shot two days earlier in the mountains north of Davao City, in the group's ancestral domain. Because the location is so remote, the details of Malibato's death are murky, but family members suspect he was killed by paramilitaries. A human rights group brought his body to Haran, where most of his village had already relocated.

Camps for the internally displaced, like Haran and the banana plantation, are now littered across Mindanao. According to Global Protection Cluster, an NGO that tracks humanitarian crises, at least [1,895 people](#) were internally displaced by conflict and violence in southeastern Mindanao as of this past January.

William Holden, a geographer at the University of Calgary who has studied the murders of activists in the Philippines, says the main drivers of the displacement are anti-communist operations carried out by the military as well as efforts by pro-mining politicians and mining companies to clear land. "It is all very hard to prove," he says, "but the indigenous people are the most marginalized of the marginalized, and they often live on lands coveted by mining companies."



A family bathes in one of the irrigation ditches at a hideout in a banana plantation on the island of Mindanao, Philippines (Lindsay Fendt).

Given the number of other conflicts in the Philippines, including Duterte's drug war and an Islamist insurgency, NGOs and human rights groups have limited resources to track the number of environmental activists and land defenders who have been murdered. Because the precise nature of Malibato's death cannot be determined, his name will not appear on any lists of those murdered in land

conflicts. This means the true toll of these conflicts in Mindanao remains unknown.

While environmental conflict in Mindanao is driving many from their land, those who choose to stay in their homes face a unique set of challenges.

Fifty miles across the Davao Gulf from the Haran Mission House, an abandoned mining pit sits on a mountain above the town of Banaybanay. It's been three years since the Chinese-owned Golden Summit Mining Corporation extracted nickel from this site, yet the community is still coping with the effects of its work. Banaybanay is known as the rice-growing capital of Mindanao, but mining sediments have polluted the surface-water supply, threatening the town's livelihood.

In 2012, officials from Golden Summit approached the village council with plans for a mine. It was to be an open-pit mine, where minerals are extracted directly from the top of the soil. Globally, open-pit mining has been criticized for causing contamination and deforestation, and cracking open the soil on a tropical archipelago like the Philippines is especially problematic. Like on most islands, the water table here runs close to the surface, and even the slightest bit of negligence can pollute entire watersheds, contaminating farms, killing off fish and threatening the health of residents.

The village council, drawn in by promises of jobs and economic prosperity, and allegedly paid off with bribes, waved off these concerns, granting Golden Summit near-unanimous support. The only holdout was Canoto Magalasing, a farmer who had been on the council for more than 40 years.

"The mine paid off the other officials," Magalasing, now in his 90s, says. "But they hadn't consulted the community. I felt bad that the mine was able to enter, but I was outvoted."

According to Magalasing, the trouble with Golden Summit began as soon as the backhoes and bulldozers rolled into Banaybanay and began pulverizing the mountaintop. A thick layer of dust spread over the town, irritating the locals who, despite company promises, had not been hired to work in the mine. In December 2012, when typhoon season came, Banaybanay flooded for the first time, having been rendered vulnerable to the storms by the loss of protection from its tallest mountain. The rains also eroded soil at the mine, and soon the rivers were running red, filling the irrigation ditches at the rice farms with toxic sediment.

Local support for the mine quickly disappeared. But even though the village council filed closure orders for the project, the company continued to operate without authorization. The farmers began to protest, calling in thousands of

people from all over the province. They led a protest march to Manila, a distance of nearly 800 miles, and wrote letters to the government.

In 2015, when the government's Mining and Geosciences Bureau finally stepped in, it found that Golden Summit hadn't obtained any of the proper permits. Additionally, Golden Summit had extracted millions of dollars' worth of nickel from the mountains without having conducted an environmental impact study and without paying a cent in taxes. The case is still under investigation.

The fact that Golden Summit was able to operate illegally on such a large scale highlights the inconsistent enforcement of mining regulations in the Philippines. While the country does have provisions to ease the environmental and social impact of large mines, these laws aren't necessarily respected or enforced during the permitting process. A recent audit by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources found that 15 of the country's 41 mines were operating in watersheds, in direct violation of mining laws. And while the law requires that indigenous groups be consulted before a mine is put in their territory, there is no official system for ensuring that the leaders who are consulted actually represent the interests of their communities.

Because the laws governing local distribution of mining money are often vague, even the distribution of tax revenues can cause conflict. Reports of bribery in mining negotiations are common throughout the Philippines, though there is no way to corroborate Masalasing's specific claims.

"There is no one that controls the sector, and there is no one that controls the revenue," says Jewellord Nem Singh, a political science professor at Leiden University in the Netherlands who researches the distribution of mining profits in the Philippines. "You often hear this story from local communities; they'll say, this person negotiated on their behalf and so the money went there."

The farmers in Banaybanay were eventually able to get a closure order for the Golden Summit mine, but this type of victory is unusual. Other communities have not had the same luck.

The Powerful and the Powerless

The rural poor make up most of the people killed or displaced in land conflicts in the Philippines, but the anti-mining movement has gained some powerful allies in recent years. Though roundly criticized for other aspects of his human rights record, Duterte has been praised for taking a stand against the expansion of destructive mining practices. Following his election in 2016, Duterte surprised mining executives by nominating Gina Lopez, a staunch anti-mining activist, to head the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, or DENR, an appointed Cabinet position. A member of one of the wealthiest families in the Philippines, Lopez had for years used her influence to speak out against the

environmental and social impacts of mining.

“I don’t understand how the money already very rich people want to make is ever more important than the water people need to drink and the food people need to eat,” Lopez says. “For every mine site, there are 1,500 farmers and fishermen who suffer. It’s horrifying.”

Lopez’s nomination had swift repercussions for the mining industry. Mining stocks plummeted, and metal prices rose. Upon taking office, she immediately ordered an audit of the sector and issued closure orders for 26 mines that were operating in watersheds. She then canceled 75 mining applications that were pending approval and ordered a ban on all prospective open-pit mines.

But Lopez’s efforts to reform the mining industry were short-lived. She served for a year before appearing for formal confirmation before the Philippine Congress, where she was rejected. Several members of the Commission of Appointments owned mines or were involved in the mining industry.

While Lopez’s ban on prospective open-pit mines remains intact, all 26 mines that she ordered closed are still in operation. During her time in office, Lopez was unable to do anything to address the murders of anti-mining activists, and the number of dead continues to mount.

“It’s the weakness of humanity. Money is everything,” Lopez says of the activist murders. “The amount of money involved in mining is massive, and if any small-time farmer or fishermen or whatever is going to stand in their way, it’s nothing for them to just kill them. No one will know who did it.”

Back at the banana plantation hideout, an entire tribe of displaced indigenous people set about rebuilding a new, temporary version of their village. Using bamboo, fallen banana leaves and tarps, families had set up elevated huts and were building more. The camp’s organizers had received word earlier in the week that more people were on the way, fleeing violence in their villages.

While these displaced families have found temporary refuge in the banana plantation, there is no long-term plan for their safety. The plantation’s wards help with the farm, but can’t leave the camp to find other work. Even as its population grows, the camp is already starting to run out of food. As dire as these displaced families’ circumstances may seem, their crisis is just one in an unending string of land conflicts in the Philippines, a pattern that shows no sign of ending soon.

At one point during my visit in March, I stepped into one of the huts to talk to the camp’s leader. Datu Tungig Mansu has a dark goatee and wears a large wooden necklace over his bare chest. He looks too young for his leadership role. He’s likely in his mid-20s, though he does not know his exact age. Speaking through a

translator, he told me that his village had begun relocating to the plantation two months earlier, after the military began harassing the villagers and threatening them with arrests. They never gave a reason for the threats, he said, but their land in the mountains has long been coveted by mining and logging companies.

He pointed to an older woman wearing traditional earrings connected with a long, beaded string that fit beneath her chin. As she began to speak, she pulled on her clothes and cried out. She squinted to fight back tears welling up in her eyes. A man in a military uniform stopped her on her way home, she said. He made her take off her clothes and stand in front of the other men in his unit as they laughed and jeered at her. When she was finally allowed to gather her clothes, she packed up her home and left town.

Rain began to fall as she completed her story. The others in the hut rolled a tarp over the windows. The small space quickly filled with the smell of wet earth and human sweat. Mansu made sure the woman was finished before he resumed speaking himself, giving voice to the widespread feeling among residents at the banana plantation that mining projects had robbed them of their way of life.

“It’s been hard because this isn’t our life here. This isn’t our home,” says Tungig Mansu. “Our life is there in the mountains. This is just a waiting game.”