

Water Conflict in the Philippines

Wars Loom Over the Philippines Due to Diminishing Water Resource

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There is an eerie calm over the Philippine villages of Fidelisan, Saclit, Dalican and Sadanga nowadays. It is because the rains are here. But come summer time, there is no telling how much violence will metaphorically turn the waters red.

For water has become a “major bone of contention” not only in these villages but nationwide. The strife between villages has been about water and in the past ten years some 276 villages have been reported by the Philippine military as having fought over water rights, water boundaries, use and sharing.

It may be unthinkable because, according to Dr. Peter H. Gleick of the Pacific Institute for Environment ((PIE), the country happens to have 323 km³ per year of total renewable freshwater supply, third most bountiful in Southeast Asia after Indonesia and Malaysia. But think again. Of that amount, the country can only withdraw a total of 29.5 percent yearly.

Dr. Gleick, in his January 2000 edition of *The World's Water* says, the Philippines will need some 393 percent of total water withdrawal starting this year 2000 until the next ten years. For the moment, only 18 percent can be withdrawn from the renewable freshwater supply for domestic use, 21 percent for industrial use and 61 percent for agricultural use.

Nationwide, the government's National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) estimates that only 67 percent of the total population of 75 million have access to clean drinking water and almost 35 percent have access to water for sanitation.

The reasons behind these statistics are obvious. First, Director Rory Villaluna of the Philippine Center for Water and Sanitation (PCWS) says, water resources nationwide are inadequately protected, conserved and rehabilitated. She first mentions water basins whose water levels are believed to have gone down because of rampant logging and failed conservation and reforestation efforts. All over the country, there is only a little more than 5 million hectares of remaining forests. Virgin forest is now down to only 700,000 hectares. Deforestation rate, reaching 1,500 hectares a day, is poorly checked and reforestation efforts, if not slow, have failed as in the 1990 national reforestation program propped by a \$325 million loan from the Asian Development Ban (ADB).

Secondly, there is no Code of Conduct for the water and sanitation sector. PCWS has proposed a code of conduct that encourages qualitative improvements and safeguards water resources by users, especially communities. Thirdly, many of the policies and guidelines of the Philippine Water Supply Systems are being inadequately implemented. Director Villaluna says reeducating the citizenry on the conservation, protection and rehabilitation of water sources is a must. There is a need, she adds, for groundwater management as well.

She says PCWS is now finalizing its plans to implement a nationwide organization of water patrols, especially in the 11 most populated cities of the country. In collaboration with the government's Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), the water patrol program seeks to encourage water districts, schools, communities and non-government organizations to protect watersheds, encourage water recycling, properly manage water and water systems and collect data on water -related issues.

Private companies and commercial groups will be included, particularly in the information and education campaign where prevention of water pollution will be stressed as well as in reducing water use, according to Villaluna.

