
Philippines: Oil and gas bringing misery and destruction in mangrove region

More than three years ago, a large vessel arrived without warning at Tañon Strait, one of the richest fishing grounds in Central Philippines and a global center for marine biodiversity. For two months, the M/S Veritas Searcher owned by the Japan Petroleum Exploration Co. Ltd. (Japex) roamed the strait to determine the existence of oil and natural gas deposits using highly sophisticated technology to detect and determine the extent of these deposits.

Unknown to the people, Japex was already undertaking an extensive geophysical survey, using a vessel with an airgun and hydrophones connected to a cable that it drags underwater to produce seismic reflection surveys to detect large scale features of the sub-surface geology. The sonic boom from an airgun array is 255 decibels (dB), way over the human threshold of 80 dB and that of animals which is ever lower. Seismic blasting can damage reproductive organs, burst air bladders, and cause physiological stress in marine organisms. It can also cause behavioral modifications and reduce or eliminate available habitat, alter fish distribution by tens of kilometers, and damage planktonic eggs and larvae. Since then, the lives of thousands of subsistence fisherfolk have never been the same.

Mangroves that line the Tañon Strait are indicative of the rich food provider ecosystem now endangered by oil and gas exploration activities. Fish is a major diet component, accounting for over 50 percent of the total animal protein consumed in the country. The oil and gas exploration activities of Japex at the Tañon Strait and NorAsia Energy Ltd. at the Cebu-Bohol Strait are adversely affecting an estimated 200,000 fisherfolk in the provinces of Cebu, Bohol, Negros Oriental, and Negros Occidental in the Central Visayas region. Various Fact Finding Missions conducted by different groups since 2005 documented destruction of fisherfolk devices for fishing, disappearance of local types of fish as well as fish catch reductions brought about by Japex and NorAsia's operations: 3 – 5 kilos from 15 – 20 kilos reported by fisherfolk using motorized boats; 0 – 2 kilos from 4 – 6 kilos by fisherfolk using non-motorized boats.

The fisherfolk organization Pamalakaya fears that oil and gas exploration activities have long-term impacts not only on the livelihood of subsistence fisherfolk in the region, but on the food security of the whole country as well. They may result in a “fish crisis” that would cut domestic production by an average of 600,000 metric tons of fish and other marine products annually for the next seven to 10 years, the group said. Even per capita fish consumption of every Filipino may be reduced by not less than 20 percent.

Meanwhile, Australian company NorAsia, is preparing to conduct off-shore drilling in the Cebu-Bohol Strait early next year. If oil and gas exploration has had such devastating impacts, imagine exploitation. “We’re scared that when the drilling starts, we would totally have nothing left to eat. Even now all we can afford most of the time is just rice. Some of my fellow fish vendors have migrated to the cities to work as domestic helpers because there is no livelihood left here,” said Lucena Sarahena, 41, a resident of Brgy. Langtad, Argao. “Our income used to be just enough for transportation, food, and electricity. Now it is barely enough even to put food on the table,” said Merla Labid, 53, whose grandson got sick of bronchopneumonia and dropped out of sixth grade.

NorAsia also promised residents of Argao that the pump prices of gasoline, as well as prices of basic commodities, will go down if the oil and gas exploration goes well. But the fishermen of Brgy. Langtad are not convinced. "What will we do with low prices if we have no money because there is no fish?" says Felisa Albandonido, 60.

In the meantime, the issue has resulted in the creation and strengthening of local fisherfolk groups across the region. Fisherfolk now lead organizing activities, public fora, pickets, and mass actions.

"We have seen in Asia and many parts of the globe that historically, oil doesn't translate into wealth of the people," says Gilbert Sape of People's Coalition on Food Sovereignty (PCFS). On the contrary, the experience of fisherfolk in Central Philippines has again proven that potential oil discovery has led to even greater poverty and destruction of the world's natural wealth.

Excerpted and adapted from: "Hunger and plunder in the seas: Oil and gas exploration causes destruction of marine environment and food insecurity in Central Philippines," Ilang-Ilang D. Quijano, PAN AP and PCFS, November 2008, <http://www.foodsov.org/resources/hungerplunder.pdf>