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Philippine military recruits residents to defend mines

By Carlos H. Conde

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MANILA: In response to attacks on mining companies by insurgent groups, the Philippine military has agreed to recruit and train residents in communities near the mines as a defense force for the companies.

The policy, officials said, is just one of several that the government is pursuing in its efforts to promote the Philippines as a major player in the mining industry in Asia.

Under the plan, the military, with the help of local governments and the mining companies themselves, would recruit residents in communities where mining investments are present. It would then train and arm the recruits to help guard the companies from armed groups, mainly the New People's Army, which is Communist and is responsible for most attacks against the mostly foreign-based mining companies.

The latest attack occurred on Jan. 1, when Communist rebels swooped down on the base camp of a copper-mining project in the southern Philippines owned by Xstrata, a miner based in Switzerland. The company said the rebels destroyed office buildings and other structures, causing an estimated \$280,000 in damages.

Officials said security is the main problem that mining companies in the Philippines face. Because the companies operate in remote regions of the country, they are easy targets of Maoist rebels, who have been waging what they call a "protracted people's war" in the countryside in the last three decades. It has the stated purpose of driving out foreign capitalists, among other revolutionary objectives.

The guerrillas usually demand "revolutionary taxes" from these firms, and those that fail to pay are usually targeted for attacks, army officials said. The military said the New People's Army currently has about 5,700 regular fighters, down from the estimated 12,000 in 2002. The administration of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo has vowed to crush the insurgency by 2010.

Foreigners are allowed to operate mining projects in the Philippines and the government has been trying to lure more of them. According to official estimates, the country has an estimated \$1 trillion worth of mineral wealth. In the case of the Xstrata project, in Mindanao, the company said it was "one of the largest undeveloped copper-gold deposits in the Southeast Asia-Western Pacific Region."

Despite these riches, the industry only generates about \$1 billion a year in revenues. The lack of safety and security has been cited by the government as a major factor for the lack of investments.

An army spokesman, Lieutenant Colonel Ernesto Torres Jr, said the civilian defense units would be considered reservists and "cannot be employed as bodyguards or operate independently from the military in the area." A regular army officer would be assigned to every defense unit.

Torres said the setup was ideal because it would not require the deployment of more regular troops and that such matters as feeding the militias would be taken care of by the mining companies.

Last week, the military deployed civilian defense units to a mining project owned by DMCI Mining in the northern Philippines that has been threatened by the Communists.

While not categorically endorsing the plan, Xstrata said the scope of the attack on its project necessitated more government intervention.

"The safety and security of our staff, contractors and visitors is a paramount consideration," Emily Russell, a spokesman for Xstrata, said Tuesday. "We will continue to seriously assess the risks in light

of the continuing threats against mining companies, and work with the host communities, our security service provider, and the local authorities to ensure a safe and secure environment for our employees."

Tom Green, executive director of Pacific Strategies and Assessments, a risk-analysis company that counts among its clients foreign mining companies in the Philippines, cautioned that the government from relying too much on the civilian defense units.

"From years of dealing with security issues like this, this is probably bad news for mining companies," Green said in an interview.

Given the history of the Philippine military with militias, Green said that these armed local volunteers "would have minimal, if any, training - no discipline. You're not going to find stellar citizens to volunteer. But you'll find guys without jobs, local thugs probably. You end up with guys that are not really much of a deterrent for the New People's Army."

Green said he viewed the plan as a "cheap way out for the Philippine armed forces."

Environment groups have likewise opposed the plan. The use of these militias, said Clemente Bautista, of the Kalikasan People's Network for the Environment, "will only result in more human rights violations against communities, civilians, and organizations opposed to mining operations."

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