

Asia/ Indonesia

“Pay for it”

People in Buyat Bay, North Sulawesi, Indonesia, have been affected by the mining operations of PT. Newmont Minahasa Raya, a subsidiary of Newmont Mining Corporation, based in Denver, Colorado, USA

By Suwiryo Ismail, an activist working on issues of environment and human rights in Indonesia.

Surtini Paputungan is a 40-year-old cookie-and-fish-seller living in Buyat, a small village at the Buyat Bay, in a remote region of Indonesia. From Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia, it takes four hours by plane and then around three hours by bus to get there.

Surtini is married and has four children. She is poor, like other villagers in her community. Her family's life depends on a small boat without motor, simple fish hooks and a net. Such tools can only be used for short-distance fishing, when the sea is calm, during October to February. The sea used to be rich with coral fish. Buyat Bay provided coral fish as living resources for its neighbouring villages.

At the peak fishing season, Surtini sells in the village market fish caught by her husband. When there were strong winds, no one goes fishing, and Surtini then sells home-baked cookies. Her earnings are only enough for a simple living. Sometimes, the family had to borrow money from neighbours and buy food on credit at the village's small store, all to be repaid, with luck, from the earnings of the next catch.

The lives of that poor fisher community with 53 households—around 240 persons—took a turn for the worse as a gold mining company, PT. Newmont Minahasa Raya, a subsidiary of Newmont Mining Corporation, based in Denver, Colorado, USA, the fifth largest mining company in the world, got a mining license from the Indonesian government in 1994 for around 500 hectares of land. Newmont started to operate an open-pit mine in 1996 and daily disposed around 2,000 tonnes of tailings (mining waste) directly into the Buyat Bay. It used a technology called ‘Submarine Tailing Disposal’ (STD), only about 82 m below sea level. Leaks of the pipe have occurred several times. Some studies by researchers from the university in North Sulawesi, Agriculture Institute in Bogor and the Indonesian government environmental impact monitoring agency, showed that Buyat Bay is now polluted by heavy metals such as arsenic, cadmium and mercury.

The only sources of livelihood of the community are polluted and destroyed, coral reefs are damaged, and many fish have been found rotten on the beach. It is now more difficult to get fish. Even when they are caught, nobody wants to buy the fish because they are afraid to eat poisoned fish. The life of Surtini and her family became more difficult because her husband could not afford a motorboat to go farther from the bay to the still unpolluted fishing grounds. Surtini stopped baking and selling cookies in 1998, as she started to suffer pain in all her joints. Her whole body became numb, and she suffered headaches, myopia, hearing disorder and speech difficulties. The worst was in 1999, when she became paralyzed for about three months. Even touching her hair became very painful. The village clinic could not explain what was wrong with her. The doctor provided by Newmont stated that nothing had happened to her, though a couple of weeks later a team from Newmont came to take blood samples of Surtini and other villagers.



A year later, following pressure from national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to disclose the result of that blood examination in a laboratory in Santa Monica in USA, Newmont admitted that the blood of the villagers was contaminated with arsenic, mercury and cyanide.

Surtini stopped eating fish from Buyat Bay because she realized that her health was getting worse when she consumed it. She eventually overcame the paralysis

and got better. The pain in her joints and headaches often returned, in particular after eating fish from Buyat Bay, which could not be avoided as she had no other alternative food. In October 2001, Surtini was brought to Jakarta by NGOs to have a medical check-up, and she stayed for one week in hospital. Doctors could not explain her sickness. This also showed how difficult it is to deal with illness from contamination by heavy metals. No hospital in Indonesia can deal with it. When Surtini gave birth to her fourth child in September 2002, her condition was so weak that she couldn't produce milk, and she had no money to buy milk for the baby. She merely suckled her baby to calm her, giving her tea and water instead. In June 2002, Surtini met two forensic doctors who informed her that her illness was a symptom of arsenic poisoning. Surtini is not the only case in Buyat. Fifty-one other villagers—80 per cent among them women—have suffered the same symptoms as Surtini: constant headaches, pain in the joints, lumps spread on the body and itchiness. A blood examination of 19 villagers by two Indonesian environmental networks (Walhi and Jatam) showed a high accumulation of arsenic and mercury in their blood.

“Tailings is the worst crime to me, my children and my community,” stated Surtini in her testimony in a workshop on Women and Globalization during the People's Forum in June 2002 in Bali prior to the Preparatory Committee Meeting of the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development. Since 1997, Surtini has been part of the movement in her village against Newmont. She was in the villagers' delegation to the local and provincial government and provincial parliament to submit complaints. She delivered testimonies in various meetings and conferences on mining and submarine tailing disposal.

All efforts have so far been fruitless. The provincial government of North Sulawesi and Newmont always insist that the tailings are safely piled on the sea floor, and that there is no pollution. They have branded villagers as subversive agents against foreign investment. Moreover, international NGO campaigns, including an intervention in the shareholder meeting of Newmont in Denver, USA in 1999, led to more oppression of villagers.

The Indonesian government fully supports foreign investment by, among other things, providing military, police and civil bureaucracy to oppress people in safeguarding the projects. USAID has threatened environmental NGOs that it will stop its funds if they

campaign against Newmont, and will not fund NGOs working against the operation of US companies in Indonesia.

Surtini and many villagers who joined the struggle suffered, on the one hand, by intimidation by the local government, and, on the other, by hatred from villagers who embraced the community development programme provided by Newmont. The programme has successfully divided the struggle. Surtini's take on globalization during the abovementioned workshop is illuminating: “It is a conspiracy between multinational corporations and our government in Jakarta, in Manado, and in the regency up to the village. Our lives are determined by Newmont, because government serves only its operation, and does what Newmont says. This conspiracy has caused suffering to us: women, children and men. We have lost everything—our livelihood, food, health, bay and land. Our children have no future. And women are the most victimized by Newmont because more women are affected by the pollution.”

This awareness encouraged Surtini to mobilize women in her village to discuss their situation, attend advocacy training by women NGOs, and take part in seminars and conferences where they delivered their testimonies, telling other people their experiences.

During the medical check-up in 2001 in Jakarta, Surtini visited several women's groups and asked for solidarity. She gave all her testimonies while suffering severe headaches. Surtini and other women pleaded with the other villagers to reject the community development programme offered by Newmont in the awareness that the struggle against the mining giant should be started by rejecting everything offered by Newmont.

Right now, Surtini and villagers of the Buyat Bay are conducting an assessment to identify what they have lost economically, socially, culturally and environmentally due to the presence of Newmont, which will stop operation in North Sulawesi in 2004. She says, “They cannot just go away leaving the damage with us. They have to pay for it”.

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Suwiryo Ismail can be contacted at claras@mailcity.com