

HUMAN FACE by Ceres

Column pieces ("Human Face"), feature stories, news, investigative and special reports by journalist Ma. Ceres P. Doyo in the Philippine Daily Inquirer. Plus photographs and other stuff.

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Fishers, pearls and Jewelmer

Thursday, October 21, 2004 Human Face columns

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In 1996, Pres. Fidel Ramos issued presidential decree 905 recognizing the South Sea Pearl as the Philippines' national gem. The local pearl industry, the PD said, has produced the world's largest pearl known as the "Pearl of Allah" or the "Pearl of Lao Tze."

What's in a pearl? Plenty, especially if it is a South Sea pearl produced by Jewelmer International Corporation, a Cojuangco-owned pearl farm in Palawan that will soon be the subject of a congressional inquiry.

Last Oct. 16, World Food Day, and in observance of indigenous people's (IP) month, Palawan IP from the Pala'wan and Molbog tribes rowed out to sea to exercise their right to fish in waters that used to be part of their ancestral fishing grounds. These areas occupied by Jewelmer, the IP said, have been off-limits to them for more than 20 years.

It all began in 1974, during the time of Pres. Marcos. The fishermen became victims of a land swap between business magnate Eduardo Cojuangco and Marcos.

Last Saturday, more than 200 members of the Samahan ng mga Katutubo sa Dulo ng Timog Palawan (Sambilog), accompanied by Akbayan representative Risa Hontiveros-Baraquel and members of Task Force Bugsuk, who were trying to cross the Pandanan Channel, were blocked by the Philippine National Police led by provincial director Col. Rey Lanada who came in a Jewelmer helicopter. Wow.

Our Southern Luzon correspondent Donna Virola was there to cover the encounter and she shared with me her report. Virola quoted Sambilog leader Panglima Rudy Calo as saying, "Our purpose is to fish again in our waters and pass through Pandanan Channel which is our shortcut to nearby islands." I myself received text messages from the site. One said: "We were not able to enter the Pandanan Channel because of a heavy cable and boat barricade. PNP Prov. Director Lanada and a dozen uniformed officers acted as Jewelmer security guards. But most of the hundred fishers were able to fish in their traditional fishing grounds even for a couple of hours!!!" It added that Hontiveros-Baraquel plans to conduct a congressional inquiry. May it be soon.

I first wrote about the IP-Jewelmer case on Earth Day last April after the IP "intruded" into what used to be theirs—the 57,000 hectares of ancestral land and waters much of which is occupied by Jewelmer. Sambilog was invoking the IP law and demanding a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT) for the fishermen as well as a cease-and-desist order for Jewelmer.

In last Saturday's encounter, Art Palatino from the province's environmental office even brought a map to show to Lanada that Jewelmer has gone beyond its area of 4,597.19 hectares.

But this issue goes deeper than just the IP's right to fish or Jewelmer's right to produce pearls. Nobody is against pearls here. If you've ogled at those luscious pearls in Jewelmer stores and leafed through their expensive coffee-table book, you'd know why South Sea pearls are special. Go to their website (www.jewelmer.com) and you'd think you're reading about paradise and pearls and a hardy deep sea-diving people called Badjao and a Frenchman named Jacques Brannelle who supposedly discovered the beautiful secret of the islands, the precious pearl oyster, the pinctada maxima. He then brought over the knowledge of periculture from French Polynesia and partnered with the Cojuangcos. Great cinematic weaving and marketing.

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If I'd make a wish for Christmas Each day would be like Christmas night
When we put aside our fighting
Find the warmth that comes from gi...

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The other day I went to see the movie "Kamoteng Kahoy" directed by Maryo de los Reyes and written by Ricky Lee, both veterans and multi-awar...

ABOUT



MA. CERES P. DOYO

a journalist for more than 30 years, writes special reports, features and a column, "Human Face," for the Philippine Daily Inquirer.

Ceres' written works have earned awards and citations. She has contributed to several major book projects. Many of her stories are in her book "Journalist in Her Country."

Her other books are "Bituin and the Big Flood" (2010), "Human Face: A Journalist's Encounters and Awakenings" (2013), "You Can't Interview God: Church Women and Men in the News" (2013) and "Macli-ing Dulag: Kalinga Chief, Defender of the Cordillera"

I've visited Palawan four times but always for rugged coverage. I've never visited any of the great resorts there but one of these days I will. That is, if they will accept pesos. No daw?

The last time I was in Palawan was when I visited Culion, the former biggest leper colony in the world, now a regular municipality and trying to be in step with the rest of the world. I've seen a lot of floating boxes where pearl oysters grow. You could get shot if you went near, I was told.

Task Force Bugsuk which supports the displaced fishermen said it "is not against the propagation of the pearl industry in the country. We are only against the Jewelmer Pearl Farm and its displacing the IP from the ancestral domain, depriving them of their main sources of livelihood, discriminating against them for their ethnicity and denying them their basic right to self-determination."

Jewelmer, the task force said, "has illegally blocked off vital and traditional navigational routes (preventing) the passage of other maritime vessels except their own. It has prohibited marginalized and subsistence fisherfolk from the use of even the simple and harmless fishing methods such as the hook and line, within the waters it has allegedly leased from Balabac town, a clear violation of the alleged lease agreement."


Jewelmer has been allowed to operate within an environmentally-critical area and despite the absence of an environmental compliance certificate (ECC) and a clearance from the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development which is a violation of the law. So far, Jewelmer has refused to dialogue with the affected groups, despite the urging of Presidential Task Force 63.


Jewelmer is not the only pearl farm in Palawan. Task Force Bugsuk says it has no issue with other pearl farms or with the entire pearl industry, but only with Jewelmer.


In its website, Jewelmer quotes, in English, the first stanza of Jose Rizal's "Mi Ultimo Adios" where the national hero speaks of the motherland as the "pearl of the orient." In the original Spanish: "Perla del mar del oriente, Nuestro perdido eden." Our Eden lost. It can't get more poignant than that.


Ah, I would like to know how that translates in the language of the Pala'wan and the Molbog. Tell me, I beseech you.


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-  **Fishers and fish**
Nov. 21, Friday last week, was World Fishers Day. How many people in this country, fishers included, knew that? This nation of islands floating between azure skies and azure sea is home to fishers and fish. Yet, among the poo... [Read More](#)

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winner of the 2016 National Book Award for Journalism. Her latest book "Press Freedom Under Siege: Reportage that Challenged the Marcos Dictatorship" was launched on March 23, 2019.. Ceres traces her roots to Iloilo and Albay. She finished college in St. Scholastica's College in Manila and has a master's degree in psychology from the Ateneo de Manila University. She was a Jefferson journalism fellow at the East-West Center in the U.S. She serves in the board of the Office of Women and Gender Concerns of the Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines.

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JOURNALIST IN HER COUNTRY:
Articles, Essays and Photographs
(Anvil, 1993)

**BITUIN AND THE BIG FLOOD/SI BITUIN AT
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