



Standoff over Philippines' Didipio mines escalates despite COVID-19 lockdown

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- *Since July last year, local communities in the province of Nueva Vizcaya have blocked the entry of fuel tankers and service vehicles to the Didipio gold and copper site.*
- *But President Rodrigo Duterte's office issued a letter authorizing OceanaGold Philippines Inc (OGPI), the company that handles the mining operation, to be allowed to truck in 63,000 liters (16,600 gallons) of fuel for generators to run water pumps in the underground mines.*
- *A hundred police personnel assisted the entry of the vehicles to the mining site on April 6, even as the region remains locked down by the COVID-19 pandemic, with all domestic land, sea and air travel banned.*

NUEVA VIZCAYA, Philippines — The ongoing lockdown in the Philippines due to the novel coronavirus pandemic has failed to defuse a standoff between a local community and OceanaGold Philippines Inc (OGPI) over a controversial gold and copper mine in the province of Nueva Vizcaya.

The situation escalated on April 6 when an estimated 100 personnel from the provincial and municipal police forces dispersed the community's "people barricade," composed of 29 community leaders and members of peasant groups.

The barricade was an extralegal measure supported by the provincial government after OGPI's permit to operate the Didipio mines lapsed on June 20, 2019.

The latest escalation comes after President Rodrigo Duterte's office authorized in January the entry of 63,000 liters (16,600 gallons) of fuel to the Didipio mining site. After the dispersal, the police detained Rolando Pulido, chair of the Didipio Earth Savers Multi-Purpose Association (DESAMA).

The 27,000-hectare (66,700-acre) Didipio mine straddles the border between the provinces of Nueva Vizcaya and Quirino, some 270 kilometers (170 miles) northeast of Manila. It's believed to hold 1.41 million ounces of gold and 169,400 tons of copper.

The standoff comes at a time when gold prices, stabilizing at \$1,600 per ounce since February this year, are expected to peak amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

On July 1, 2019, local communities in Didipio and Alimit, hosts to the underground mines, set up a blockade to stop the entry of fuel tankers and service vehicles to the mining site. After a series of confrontations in the streets and in the courts, OceanaGold formally suspended its

operations on Oct. 15, 2019, while it processes its application for an extension.

The community took over abandoned checkpoints, and with members working on shifts, maintained the blockade until the COVID-19 pandemic placed Metro Manila and the whole island of Luzon under an “enhanced community quarantine” — a lockdown that has suspended all domestic land, sea and air travel from March 15 until April 14.

Prior to the lockdown, residents blocked OGPI's efforts to send in trucks carrying 630,000 liters (166,400 gallons) of fuel to run generators for its dewatering activities, which includes removing or pumping out groundwater from the mine site.

Governor [Carlos Padilla](#) clarified that the president's letter allowing the delivery of fuel does not authorize the mining giant to continue its mining operations, which stalled for a lack of an extension.

“The provincial government recognizes the authority granted by the Office of the President to OGPI to transport fuel for its dewatering activities,” Padilla wrote in a letter dated March 10 to Eduardo Año, the secretary of the interior and local government. “We have reservations, however, as to the amount of fuel to be transported to the mine site.”

Padilla said that 630,000 liters is “excessive if the same is to be used only for the dewatering activities,” adding that a tank of fuel, with a capacity of about 20,000 liters (5,300 gallons), can run generators for 50 hours during a power outage, which seldom transpires in the area.

Three tanker trucks, carrying roughly 60,000 liters, were delivered to the site.

Environmental groups have questioned the timing of the move as it comes while the country is under a state of calamity (a state of emergency during which the government has access to extra funds) due to a rising number of coronavirus cases. There were 3,660 confirmed infections in the Philippines and 163 deaths as of April 6.

"The national government violates its own pronouncements and orders ... to give way for large-scale mining interests," said Leon Dulce of the Kalikasan People's Network for the Environment. "OceanaGold must be held accountable if the pandemic spreads in the villages affected by its operations."

Banner image of the Didipio mines in the provinces of Nueva Vizcaya and Quirino. Image courtesy of OGPI.

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