



Ombudsman
Burch del Castillo

More than four years ago, a New York City-based environmental group listed the Marilao-Meycauayan-Obando river system in Bulacan as among the 30 dirtiest in the world.

The finding, made by the Blacksmith Institute, even singled out the Marilao River as the fifth dirtiest on the planet—next only to the Yellow River in Lanzhou, China; Buriganga River in Bangladesh, Yamuna River in India, and the dirtiest of them all—the Citarum River in Indonesia.

The environmental group described this particular river system as “extremely polluted,” into which tons upon tons of industrial and household waste were being dumped indiscriminately on a daily basis.

It’s easy to imagine that much of the mind-boggling tonnage of filth and toxic effluents are being regularly barfed into the Manila Bay by this internationally notorious river system.

The people of Bulacan—particularly those in Marilao, Meycauayan and Obando—had long been aware of this stark reality. They didn’t need some environmental group from New York to tell them how indescribably filthy their rivers are.

But nonetheless, when the Blacksmith Institute came out with its comparative rankings of the world’s far-gone rivers—they, and the rest of the nation as well, were taken aback and embarrassed.

Initially, our Department of Environment and Natural Resources was in denial. Its immediate reaction was to question Blacksmith’s survey methodology. It was a knee-jerk reaction, an apparent attempt at suggesting Blacksmith’s findings may be misleading or inconclusive.

It did not take too long, however, before it realized that there was no use in trying to belittle the problem. It knew only too well that earlier studies made right here at home had listed the

notoriously filthy river system as among 19 priority water sources in the country that needed to be cleaned up and rehabilitated.

In July 2009 Environment Secretary Lito Atienza decided to give the local officials of Bulacan a warning. If they don't start cleaning up their respective segments of this river system within 30 days, they would be administratively charged before the environmental courts, he said.

There was a positive reaction to the Blacksmith report. Subsequent news accounts said the cities of Caloocan and Valenzuela in Metro Manila; and San Jose del Monte, in Bulacan; as well as the towns of Maycauayan, Marilao, Obando and Sta. Maria, all in Bulacan, had vowed to undertake a cleanup of the river system. (The involvement of towns and cities outside of Bulacan's boundaries where the river has tributaries was apparently found essential in any attempt at rehabilitation. Everybody had to pitch in, in short.)

Atienza was quoted as saying: "The continuing mandamus [writ of kalikasan] imposed by the Supreme Court last December for Manila Bay's rehabilitation obligates us...to take the necessary legal recourse to compel the concerned local government units to do their part in cleaning up their rivers whose polluted state directly impacts on the Manila Bay...Enough has been done to analyze why the river is dirty, and putting a stop to wanton throwing of garbage into it is the first step..."

Since then, however, the ballyhooed collective effort has produced no results.

The enthusiasm momentarily flared then just as quickly petered out. Nothing came of it.

If anything, the Marilao-Meycauayan-Obando river system has only become dirtier than ever, even feeding Manila Bay with increasing volumes of all sorts of industrial and human waste.

The observation made by Atienza at the time he was pushing for a collective save-the-river campaign was that the Prenza Dam in Marilao looked like an open garbage dump. The surface of the dam water was almost fully covered with garbage. No wonder its river has been adjudged the fifth dirtiest in the world.

The Blacksmith report observed that the 55-kilometer river system has become the dumping site of all sorts of toxic industrial effluents from tanneries, textile factories, gold refineries and jewelry-making, electroplating, livestock and poultry and other manufacturing establishments. Long stretches of its upstream segments have also been used as a latrine by the households that line up its banks.

This is why those brave enough to negotiate its length from its downstream segments in Obando town bring with them face masks thick with gauze. But even the thickest gauzes can hardly protect your olfactory nerves from the horrible unflushed toilet stench when one gets to the Valenzuela segment of the waterway.

If you're truly gutsy, you could linger in the Meycauayan portion where the thick, black surface seems like a stagnant pond. It's almost like a scene from Dante's *Inferno*, not a ripple in the oozing liquid, with turds floating everywhere. It's a perfect place to torture anyone into confessing crimes he never committed.

If you want to drink in the "local color" of the Marilao portion of this river, it might be wise to take a banca right where the town is instead of rowing to it from the next town.

If you have the stomach for it, that is, because—so I'm told—it could be worse than the Meycauayan leg. For my part, I'd rather rely on a third-person account, thank you.

The good news is the three mayors of Obando, Marilao and Meycauayan have finally come to the realization that if they don't act in coordination with one another now, nothing would come of any piecemeal effort to resuscitate the fifth dirtiest in all the world.

A comprehensive "Sagip Ilog" (Save the River) campaign would be launched this afternoon in Obando by Mayor Orencio E. Gabriel at the town Plaza right in front of the town's church. Mayor Gabriel's henchmen say concerned residents from all 12 barangays composing the municipality would be attending in a massive show of support.

Henceforth, this column would be closely following developments concerning Sagip Ilog. Indeed, the people of Obando, the residents of Meycauayan and Marilao—as well as their political leaders—would be the direct beneficiaries of a successful river cleanup campaign. They all have a big, direct stake in this because their livelihood, health and well-being are on the balance.

This is an ecological advocacy even non-Bulakeños should at least encourage, if not actively support. This is, in fact, one undertaking deserving the full support of the national government and international environmental groups.

omerta_bdc@yahoo.com