



## EDITORIAL

# National freedom has no price tag

**T**he Filipino people were seriously disgusted by President Rodrigo Duterte's February 12 speech where he declared "if America requires the presence of their troops here, I'm okay with that" under the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA)—as long as they pay with military weapons.

He said the US has not been paying enough, especially since it is already stockpiling weapons in the former Subic Naval Base in Zambales and Palawan. Malacañang insisted that the US must give the Philippines an amount equal to what it gives Pakistan, a country used by the US for its aggression, occupation and continued intervention in Afghanistan in one of its longest wars of conquest. It claims the Philippines should get enough since it will surely be drawn into a war between the US and China should it break out in the South China Sea.

Duterte treats the country's sovereignty as a commodity: "it's all about money" he declared in 2016. He ended his drama of "terminating

the VFA" and claims of upholding an "independent foreign policy." He has exposed his unabashed puppetry to the US. More guns and bombs is all he wanted all along.

Over the past years, Duterte pretended to be "angry" at the US even when in reality, he has done nothing to defend Philippine national sovereignty. He surrounded himself with US yes-men who perpetuate old pro-US policies, especially in the military and economy. He promised Trump in 2017 that he will end peace negotiations with the NDFP, crush the armed revolutionary movement and amend the constitution to give foreign capitalists full ownership rights over land, business and other Philippine resources. That same year, the US

initiated Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines (OPEP).

Duterte never questioned the lopsided military agreements including the Military Assistance Agreement (MAA), the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT), the VFA, the Mutual Logistics Support Agreement (MLSA) and the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). These treaties bind the country's foreign policy to the US and is the reason why it cannot be considered independent.

Duterte's "angry at America" stance is a sham. He merely used this to show off to China, the imperialist rival of the US. In return, Duterte was promised tens of billions of dollars worth of infrastructure project grants for his cronies. Duterte and his cohorts strengthened ties with the Chinese drug and casino syndicates. On the mere promise of China, Duterte gave China the license to establish mili-

tary facilities in seven artificial islands within Philippine territorial waters, lay claim to Bajo de Masinloc in violation of the 2016 decision of the International Arbitration Tribunal and drive away Filipino fishermen from their seas.

Duterte's ties with China fully benefited a few big bourgeois compradors, bureaucrat capitalists as well as military officers. Some of them are keen to the growing economic and political strength of China. US imperialists have grown concerned about this development that it has taken measures to ensure the support and loyalty of its followers in the country.

The new Biden government of the US aim to strengthen its control of the neocolonial state, mainly by tightening its grip on the AFP. This is in line with its plan to more aggressively defend US economic and geopolitical interests in the face of the growing strength of its rival China. While posing as "progressive" in domestic issues against the ultra-Right policies of the previous Trump government, Biden is also known to

favor aggressive military posturing.

After speaking recently to the newly appointed US defense secretary, Defense Sec. Delfin Lorenzana declared he and the military favor the continuation of the VFA. This was a clear message from the US that it will no longer tolerate Philippine rapport with China. It is now mobilizing its forces in the Philippines, inside and outside the ruling regime, to further strengthen and ensure its military, economic and political control of the Philippine ruling class.

Because of this, expect the pro-US politicians to intensify opposition to growing Chinese economic and political influence. The US may accommodate Duterte's demand for "bigger payment" but only because this will also serve its strategic interests. On the other hand, expect China to take measures to counter US influence by using both its economic and military might.

The Filipino people must stand up and denounce Duterte's slavishness to the US and China, to the detriment of the country's sove-

reignty and benefit of the economic and military interests of foreign imperialists. The people must assert that national freedom has no price tag. They must push for countries in Southeast Asia to defend their rights and the freedom in international waters against China's expansionism.

They must demand for the complete abrogation of the VFA, EDCA, MDT, MLSA and other one-sided military agreements that give US military forces extraterritorial rights in the Philippines and trample on its national sovereignty. On the other hand, they must denounce the Duterte regime for kowtowing to China's annexation of Philippine territories and plunder of the country's natural resources.

The Party calls on the American people to censure the Biden government for aligning itself with the Duterte tyrannical regime in exchange for securing US geopolitical interests. The American and Filipino people must cooperate to fight US interventionism and support for the bloody war of suppression in the Philippines. AB



Vol. LII No. 4 | February 21, 2021

Ang *Ang Bayan* is published in Pilipino, Bisaya, Iloko, Hiligaynon, Waray and English.

Ang Bayan welcomes contributions in the form of articles and news items.

Readers are encouraged to send feedback and recommendations

for improving our newspaper.



[instagram.com/prwcnewsroom](https://www.instagram.com/prwcnewsroom)



[@prwc\\_info](https://twitter.com/prwc_info)



[cppinformationbureau@gmail.com](mailto:cppinformationbureau@gmail.com)

## Contents

<b>Editorial: National freedom has no price tag</b>	1
CPP assures humanitarian corridor	2
AFP modernization relies heavily on the US	3
BDP, military milking cow	4
4 NPA offensives in Bukidnon	4
Dirty war victimizes 2 children	5
Courts junk 5 trumped-up charges	5
Oil prices rise for third time this year	6
Police raids bakwit school in Cebu	6
US Senate acquits Tump for 2nd time	6
Hundreds of thousands protest in Myanmar	6
Disinterest and low level of learning	8
Students' mental health suffers	8
Create Bill: tax cuts for capitalists	10

### CPP assures humanitarian corridor for Covid-19 vaccines

THE COMMUNIST PARTY of the Philippines (CPP) assured the public that a humanitarian corridor will be opened for the safe and unimpeded passage of Covid-19 vaccines in guerrilla base areas and zones. It is a matter of principle for the NPA to respect all humanitarian undertakings that benefit the masses.

The Party strongly suggested that the transportation, distribution and inoculation drive of Covid-19 vaccines especially in the interior areas be handled by the International Committee of the Red Cross whose personnel are properly trained and who have the facilities to undertake such missions.

"CPP..." continued on page 3

Ang Bayan is published fortnightly by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Philippines

# AFP modernization relies heavily on the US

The Armed Forces of the Philippines' (AFP) modernization program relies on US matériel, training and aid. Majority of its big ticket items, such as airplanes, ships and helicopters, can only be acquired from US companies or its subsidiaries and partners in allied countries such as Israel, Brazil and Jordan. AFP officials insist that only US-made or those made by its allies are compatible with the current AFP weapons and systems. This is the biggest stumbling block to acquiring weapons from China or Russia.

This is also the reason why the threat of abrogating the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) was never credible. US military aid is closely linked to the extraterritorial rights and privileges US troops enjoy in the country. It is in Duterte's interest to let funds flow to the AFP as he coddles military officials eager to get hold of "modern" weapons. They drool over fat sales contracts, as well as maintenance contracts from which they pocket kickbacks in the long term.

Outside Duterte's outbursts, the VFA was never put into question despite its "unresolved" status. Military exercises pushed through in 2019. The Balikatan 2020 was postponed due to the pandemic but smaller exercises were launched. There have been no let-up of US military presence in Philippine seas where they launch war games and freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea.

The high-level meeting of US and Philippine military officials of the Security Engagement Board pushed through in October 2020. US activities in the Philippines were set. Among these is the expected resumption of the Balikatan in May this year.

In exchange, the US has provided the AFP with big items in its modernization program for 2019-2020. Last February 17, the AFP inaugurated the first of two C-130 Hercules transport airplane in Villamor Airbase. In the February 13 ceremony where Duterte was guest, the AFP boasted of its new Philippine Air Force assets. Among these are six S70i Blackhawk transport

helicopters and six A-29B Super Tucano attack airplanes. Also on display then were six Hermes 900 and four Hermes 450 drones for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance.

The AFP also received missiles and a ScanEagle UAV system (with eight drones) during the last quarter of 2020. These were arranged under the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency which oversees the sale of old and mothballed US military matériel and vehicles.

The AFP also received donations from Jordan in the form of hundreds of M14 rifles and two old Bell AH-1S Cobra attack helicopters.

According to the US embassy in the country, the Philippines received the largest share in military aid in the Indo-Pacific region. From 2015 to 2020, up to P33 billion in aid has been delivered to the Philippines in the form of airplanes, ships, military vehicles, short arms and other matériel, it said. In addition, the US also allocated funds for the operation and military support through the Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines (OPE-P). In 2020, it spent almost P4 billion for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance aerial support for military and police combat operations in Mindanao. The OPE-P is under the US' Overseas Contingency Operations, previously known as its counter-terrorism operations.

In a Senate hearing last February 2020, Philippine foreign relations secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. said that the \$245 million aid that



the US planned to grant the AFP could be withheld if the VFA is abrogated. The AFP plans to acquire an additional 10 Black Hawk helicopters, six to eight ScanEagle UAV and howitzers. **AB**

"CPP..." from page 2

The Party also suggested against transporting vaccines using military vehicles, especially those not properly marked and carrying armed soldiers.

At present, vaccines which Duterte promised the people have yet to be delivered. The delivery of vaccines from the World Health Organization was delayed as the regime failed to enact a requisite indemnification law. The Philippines is now left at the mercy of the agency as the majority of the global vaccine supply has already been monopolized by rich countries.

Instead of allotting adequate funds to ensure the inoculation of priority sectors, the regime is pushing local governments, private companies and pharmacies to act on their own. This will further result in unequal distribution of vaccines.

# NTF-ELCAC's barangay program, a military milking cow

Just like the E-CLIP, "laying down of arms" and other counterinsurgency programs, the ₱16.4-billion Barangay Development Program (BDP) fund of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) will certainly be used to line the pockets of military officials. It provides lots of opportunity for corruption in the form of kickbacks from infrastructure projects in remote communities and villages.

The NTF-ELCAC touts that the BDP will dissuade the peasant masses from further supporting the New People's Army (NPA). Its funds will supposedly go to road construction, building schools, water systems and health centers, as well as sanitation and reforestation programs. Past regimes have repeatedly implemented such projects but failed to fundamentally improve the lives of the masses. The programs only created an illusion of change as these did not address widespread poverty, hunger, oppression and exploitation in the countryside which stem from the issue of landlessness. Just like earlier programs, the BDP will not fundamentally alter the socioeconomic conditions of the people.

Corruption is more evident under the BDP. The biggest share of funds go to Davao City, with 82 barangays listed in the program. Next to it are the provinces Bukidnon, Davao de Oro, Agusan del Norte, Agusan del Sur, Surigao del Norte, Surigao del Sur, Iloilo, Misamis Oriental and North Cotabato. Almost half of the total BDP funds is shared between two regions, namely Region 11 and Region 13. The rest of the funds is shared by the rest of the 12 regions.

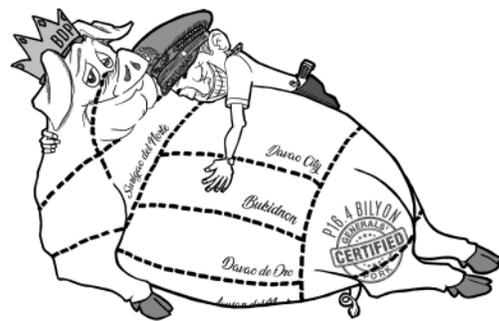
These funds will supposedly be allotted to barangays that are "cleared" from the influence of the NPA. However, data collated since 2020 indicate that there were at least 100 armed encounters recorded in 46 (5.3%) of barangays included in the NTF-ELCAC's BDP.

The uniform distribution of ₱20 million to each barangay reveals

that there really was no assessment of the specific needs of its recipients and that the amount is merely to give local officials equal kickback opportunities. The NTF-ELCAC has also failed to consider the different population sizes in each barangay. As a result, there is a wide disparity in the per capita distribution of the BDP funds from ₱457 in the biggest barangay to ₱181,818 in the smallest barangay.

To justify the program, the NTF-ELCAC claimed that the BDP list was a product of rigorous vetting and multisectoral consultations. However, even Davao City Sara Duterte was forced to admit that she was not consulted about the projects. Her denial came after she was questioned about the ₱1.64-billion allocation to her city, which is 40% of the total funds allocated to the entire Davao region. The NTF-ELCAC is clearly subsuming the civil bureaucracy and local officials.

The NTF-ELCAC's claim that at least 15% of the funds of the BDP will go to constructing schools (or ₱3 million per barangay) is pure rubbish. Data by the Department of Education indicate that, 216 of the 822 barangays in the list already have schools. These include nine schools in Malabog, Davao City; six in Colosas, Davao City; five each in Barangay Kingking, Pantukan, and barangays Tamugan and Malamba in Davao City; and four in Suawan, Davao City. Furthermore, in the BDP list of barangays in Region 11, there are 13 barangays with at least three schools each; 18 barangays that have two schools each, and 52 barangays with one school each.



Of the 82 BDP-listed barangays in Davao City, 70 (or 85%) already have schools, with 65 barangays having one to three schools, and four barangays with up to two schools and one barangay with nine schools. AB

## NPA-Bukidnon mounts 4 offensives in 4 days

THE NEW PEOPLE'S Army-Bukidnon mounted four successive offensives against the butcher 8th IB and 3rd Special Special Forces Battalion from February 10 to 13. Five soldiers were slain while 10 others were wounded.

Four soldiers were instantly killed after being blasted by the NPA in Barangay Kibalabag, Malaybalay City on February 10. Two harassment operations were also mounted in the same barangay on February 11 and 12.

A 3rd SFB soldier encamped at Sitio Elyan, Sta. Filomena, Quezon was also killed. The said military units are responsible for harassing and arresting Lumads in Bukidnon.

**Quezon.** An 85th IB trooper was killed during an ambush by the NPA against their vehicle on January 23 in Barangay dela Paz, Buenavista.

**Oriental Mindoro.** The NPA-Mindoro shot at operating troops of the 4th IB in Sitio Paraiso, Happy Valley, Roxas on January 26. Two soldiers were reportedly wounded.

## Regime's dirty war victimizes two children

While the Anti-Terror Law is still being debated upon in the Supreme Court on how it violates democratic rights, the reactionary state is perpetrating unabated attacks against the people especially in remote areas that are far from the eyes of the media and magistrates. Two children have been recently victimized by the Duterte regime's dirty war which targets civilians. The victims also include members of organizations repeatedly red-tagged by the military in the past.

### Attacks on children's rights.

Baby Carlen, a 1-month old infant and daughter of political detainee Nona Espinosa died on February 14 due to a lung complication and blood infection.

She was separated from her mother three days after she was born. Espinosa and eight others were arrested in September 2020 in Guihulngan City, Negros Oriental.

In Maguindanao, six-year old Saad Abdulkadir Tumbi also died on the same day due to infection caused by the wounds he sustained when their house in Barangay Sambulawan, Datu Salibo, Maguindanao was hit by a mortar splinter launched by 6th ID on December 13, 2020. Four other civilians, including another child, were wounded during the said incident.

**Political killing.** Two suspects gunned down Lucrecia Tasic, barangay councilor of Hanopol Norte, Balilihan, Bohol inside her house last February 16. Tasic was

an active supporter of and campaigner for Anakpawis partylist during the previous elections.

Last February 8, elements of the 90th and 72nd IB killed three farmers in Marinangao, Barangay Sarayan, Pres. Roxas, North Cotabato.

The police made it appear that the victims were killed after attempting to "fight back." The victims were identified as Buenaventura Dawal and spraying machine operator Dennis Nogollos. Dawal's housemate who works as a staff of a local agricultural institution, was also killed.

**Arrest.** The police arrested Rogelio de Asis, chairperson of Pama-lakaya-Caraga and member of the Promotion of Church People's Response, inside his house in Barangay Matabao, Buenavista, Agusan del Norte on February 11. He was slapped with a trumped-up murder charge.

Last February 6, the police arrested activist and health worker

Vilma Dalangin-Yecyec, 72, in Mainit, Surigao del Norte. The victim was accused of being an NPA member.

In Baggao, Cagayan, the police raided the house of Ruben Salvador, barangay chairman of Agaman last February 8. His house was searched through using a warrant issued by Judge Shiela Gacutan-Labuguen of the Baggao Municipal Trial Court. The police planted evidences of firearms and explosives to justify the arrest.

**Bombing.** The military repeatedly bombed the communities near Barangay Masaya, Buenavista, Quezon after engaging in an encounter with an NPA unit in the said barangay in the early morning of February 5. This traumatized and disturbed the lives of 26,200 residents in the neighboring towns of Buenavista, San Narciso, Catanauan and Mulanay. At least 20 barangays in Lopez, Macalelon, General Luna and Catanauan are currently under focused military operations.

In Mountain Province, two military helicopters bombed farmlands and pasturelands of residents in Barangay Tamboan, Besao last February 11. After the bombing, troops of the 7th IB and Philippine National Police-Cordillera indiscriminately strated the area.

**Harassment.** The Bureau of Immigration formally ordered the deportation of Otto De Vries, a missionary from the Netherlands and a volunteer researcher of the Ecumenical Institute for Labor Education & Research last February 18.

**Demolition.** More than 50 houses were illegally demolished by around 150 goons of landgrabber Pablito Encarnacion, along with the police in sa Barangay Liwayway, Sta. Rosa, Nueva Ecija on February 17.

The goons and police did not have a demolition permit and have not informed the residents about the demolition. AB

### Courts junk 5 trumped-up charges

VARIOUS COURTS SUCCESSIVELY junked five cases with trumped-up charges against activists, an NDFP consultant and others in the past 10 days. These include the trumped up charge of illegal possession of explosives against Gabriela leader Beatrice Belen; illegal possession of firearms and explosives against National Democratic Front-Panay Concha Araneta; libel against the broadcasters of Radyo Natin Guimba; inciting to sedition against teacher Ronnel Mas; and illegal assembly against the Marikina 10. The resolution of the Araneta case was issued last January 6 but was publicized only last February 18.

Earlier on February 5, the court also voided the search warrants used to arrest Lady Ann Salem and Rodrigo Esparago but they remain detained until today.

## Police raids Bakwit School in Cebu

THE POLICE RAIDED the Bakwit School serving as temporary school of Lumad evacuees at the University of San Carlos in Talamban, Cebu City on February 15. The Lumads and their teachers sought refuge at the university since March 2020 as they could not go back to Mindanao due to the lockdown. The university administrators consider them as their guests.

A video recording of the raid showed Lumad children screaming and crying while being forcibly taken by police. Twenty six individuals were arrested and detained, including 19 minors. Chad Booc, a volunteer teacher and petitioner against the Anti-Terror Law, was also arrested.

The police connived with the military, members of the Alamara paramilitary and local officials of Talaingod, Davao del Norte, to make it appear that the raid was a "rescue operation." They charged Booc and six other volunteer teachers with kidnapping and illegal detention.

The illegal raid and arrest was met with widespread condemnation. Students of the Bakwit School in the Diliman campus of the University of the Philippines along with their supporters immediately protested at the Commission on Human Rights (CHR). Even the CHR belied the claims of the police that the Lumad children were "coerced" to stay at the Bakwit School.

The Makabayan bloc filed a resolution in Congress to have the incident investigated. At the Supreme Court, the magistrates ordered petitioners to include the case of Booc in their written petition against the Anti-Terror Law.

Meanwhile, the Communist Party of the Philippines vowed to hold to account the Lumad exploiters. It condemned the NTF-ELCAC which was undoubtedly behind the incident.

## Hundreds of thousands protest in Myanmar

DESPITE THE PANDEMIC, hundreds of thousands are marching daily in Myanmar since February 5 to protest against the military dictatorship. They demand the military junta which took over the government to relinquish its power and to release the country's elected government officials led by Aung San Suu Kyi.

The Tatmadaw (military in Myanmar) imposed rigid restrictions to prevent the demonstrations. Most protests were dispersed. It also repeatedly cut the people's internet access in an attempt to prevent the people from converging. More than 500 individuals have been arrested and three have died after being shot by the police.

The Tatmadaw launched a coup and arrested the civilian officials of the country on February 1. Many believe that this attack aims to dismantle Suu Kyi's party and permanently reimpose absolute military rule in the country.

## US Senate acquits Trump for second time

THE US SENATE acquitted former Pres. Donald Trump last February 14 of the charge incitement of insurrection which resulted in a riot at the US Capitol on January 6. Voting 57-43 in favor of the conviction, the Senate failed to convict Trump because the vote fell short of the two-thirds majority (67 votes). The Senate first acquitted Trump of other charges in January 2020.

In response, the US Congress announced its plan to form a commission to investigate pro-Trump groups and their Republican supporters who participated in the riot. Initial reports indicate that one out of five rioters are veterans or active members of the US military.

## Oil prices rise for third time this year

FOR THE THIRD time this year, prices of petroleum products increased last February 14. In particular, the prices of gasoline, diesel and kerosene increased by ₱0.75, ₱1.25 and ₱1.10 per liter, respectively. On February 9, the prices also rose by ₱0.85, ₱1.10 and ₱1.00 respectively.

Compared to last year, prices of gasoline are already higher by ₱4 per liter, diesel by ₱3.90 and kerosene by ₱3.35. This is despite the drop in the global prices of crude oil during the pandemic.

The Department of Energy reasoned that the increase is due to the continuous cut in oil production by member-countries of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries or OPEC to

artificially increase prices of crude oil. The price of crude oil hit record high in a year last February 5.

Previous decreases in global prices were not felt in the Philippines due to the additional 10% tax imposed by the Duterte regime on imported crude oil and petroleum products last May 2020, through Executive Order 113. This aimed to generate an additional ₱6.8-billion revenue purportedly for pandemic aid programs.

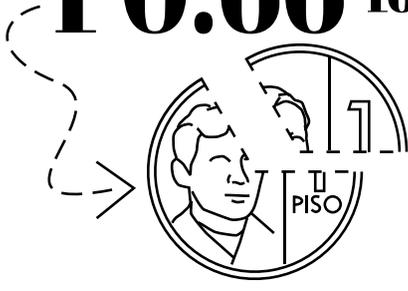
The Department of Energy itself then warned that the additional tax will increase the price of gasoline and diesel by ₱0.60 and ₱0.84 per liter.

This means that a portion of Duterte's much touted pandemic aid actually came from the pockets of the people in the form of higher charges for transportation, food and public utilities.

The regime has earlier imposed additional taxes on crude oil through the TRAIN Law. This increased the prices of gasoline, kerosene, LPG and other petroleum products by ₱1 per liter, and ₱1.50 per liter for diesel.

—IN—SHORT

**₱0.66** for every **₱1** revenue that will be collected by the government **will be used for debt servicing next year.**

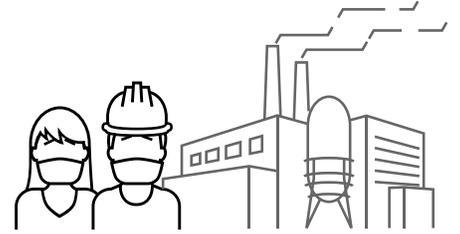


**15 million**

out of **73 million** Filipinos aged **18 and above**

are still unregistered for the 2022 elections.

**133,315** Filipino workers suffered wage loss



(became unemployed, temporarily without work, or suffered income reduction) last January. **25,226 of them were retrenched.**

Source: Department of Labor and Employment, February 2021

**648%**

proposed increase in the minimum access volume for pork

to purportedly address the supply shortage. Local hog raisers believe that this will only further undermine local production.

**22 children and 50**

adult Haitian immigrants were deported by the US

last February 8 despite Biden's order to temporarily suspend deportation.

Approximately **74,000**



children and teenagers **aged 17 and below got pregnant from 2020-2021.**

This means that approximately **133,000 households** that will be formed in **2021** will be led by **minors.**

Source: Commission on Population and Development, February 2021

The global debt is already at

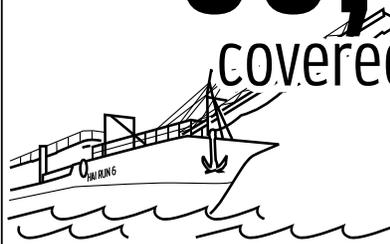
**\$281 trillion,**

the highest debt recorded in history.

**\$24 trillion (9%) - increase during the pandemic.**

Source: Institute of International Finance, February 2020

**39,424** hectares of seas are covered by magnetite mining operations in Cagayan



of Peniel Resources Mining Corp., T & T Resources and Mining Corp., J & M Resources and Mining Corp., three different companies but with same president, **Anthony James K. Gil.**

**75 barangays** in the towns of Abulug, Appari, Ballesteros, Buguey, Gonzaga, Pamplona, Sanchez-Mira are directly affected by the mining activities. **100%** of the **magnetite** that will be extracted will be **exported to China.**

# Disinterest and low level of learning

The Duterte regime has allowed this February the reopening of classes in universities and colleges offering medical-related courses. These include the University of the Philippines-Philippine General Hospital, University of Sto. Tomas and Centro Escolar University. But how about other schools?

The government still has no comprehensive plan for the safe reopening of schools for majority of children in the country. While its economic managers railroad the reopening of cinemas, sports hubs and other places for entertainment, it continues to hesitate to reopen schools even in areas with low cases of infection.

Sec. Leonor Briones of the Department of Education (DepEd) herself admitted last February 16 that 50% of students said they want to return to face-to-face learning. In an earlier survey by the Movement for Safe, Equitable, Quality and Relevant Education, a teachers and parents alliance advocating safe reopening of schools, 54% of teachers said a significant number of students could no longer follow online classes and lessons.

Among them is Lester, a Grade 4 public school student currently enrolled under the modular learning system. "I do not understand some of the lessons because we are on our own in answering the modules," he said. He only uses Facebook Messenger to consult his classmates and teachers on lessons he cannot understand.

He allots up to four hours per day during weekdays to answer the modules. "I'm lucky because my parents and cousins sometimes help me." The erroneous content and slow distribution of modules further burdens him.

The Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT) asserts that the diminishing number of students can be resolved with limited and safe face-to-face classes while implementing distance learning in other places.

"The current blended learning

system, unsupported by adequate funds, is not sufficient to address the needs of students until the next academic year," said ACT.

Jane, a Grade 2 teacher, said only 12 of her 23 students regularly participate in online classes. Many are unable to attend classes because they have no or slow internet connection. She said not all parents can avail of internet services.

Teacher Elsa thinks that students can only understand 20% of the lessons under the current learning system. She also noticed the decreasing number of participants in her online classes. The number of absentees increased from only five per session in the beginning, to more than half this January.

Meanwhile, more and more students are also becoming disinterested in learning as they stare at gadgets all the time, with no physical interaction. They sorely miss face-to-face classes as well as physically relating with their friends and teachers.

Jona, a grade 8 student, said that "it is difficult to focus while at home. There is no clear boundary between home and school." She allots 4-6 hours daily for her studies, and sometimes less when she is sleepy or gets bored.

When asked if she wants to go back to school, she responded: "of course." She said that it feels different to study in classrooms. "It is easier to consult teachers, and students can interact with their classmates."

This was also the response of other students who already want to go back to school. Joel, another student, that he already misses school activities and programs, as well as playing with his friends."



The ACT Teachers said that in implementing limited physical classes, the government must ensure that there are health facilities and workers in schools, and prioritize the inoculation of education frontliners.

This program will require an additional budget of ₱2 billion, on top of the ₱13 billion slashed from the proposed DepEd budget for 2021. AB

## Students' mental health suffers

THE ILL-ADAPTED BLENDED learning system is causing unmanageable mental stress to more and more children. Since its implementation, at least 18 children have reportedly committed suicide after experiencing difficulties in answering modules, due to the lack of a support system, and slow or lack of internet connection.

The last incident was the suicide of a 10-year old child from Catanduanes who reportedly committed suicide last February 17 after failing to answer his module.

Instead of addressing the problem, the DepEd denied that these incidents are related to its failed learning program.

Meanwhile, DepEd's announcement of its plan to extend the academic year by two weeks was also met with widespread criticism.

