

TANJAY CONFRONTATION

Our hometown usually is serene, and without much exciting happenings, until today. There was a confrontation between the local city government's police and labor forces with a group of barricaders. The two groups met, arguments ensued, a scuffle started, then stones flew. The police were wise enough not to counter with more force, and they withdrew. But it seems this may just be the beginning of more trouble.

And it all seems to have started by questions as to what is "dredging" and what is "mining".

From what I understand, sometime last year, the mayor announced that the Tanjay river which has been suffering more flooding lately, will be dredged. And while it normally would cost some millions, here was a company that would do it for free, since they would cart away part of the dredging. They were after the "black sand" which apparently the Tanjay river has plenty of, washed down from the mountains. This magnetite is worth all that effort for a foreign outfit named "Sino Italy".

But not much information was disseminated, so conjectures were rife about what would happen if they dredged too deeply into the river? Wouldn't the levees fail, and undermine adjoining river property? How much black sand would be dredged, and how long a period would the contract be? Is this really dredging, or mining? Are there any permits, and if so, are there any environmental impacts that were considered? None of the town people seemed to get a satisfactory answer, especially for those at the shoreline where a processing plant was built. And the dredging barge was right offshore - not in the river! Everyone was asking: doesn't this smell of some anomalous deal between gov't officials and foreign contractor?

When local residents in barrio Tambacan got fed up, especially when they felt that the operations were detrimental to their neighborhood and livelihood, they took the matter into their hands a few days ago and blockaded the narrow road (on their private property) from the Chinese technicians operating the plant, and the trucks that carted the magnetite away.

Today, the word went out by text and FB that there would be a showdown mid-afternoon. Oh goodie, I thought, I missed EDSA on both occasions. Perhaps this is now time to see some action. We of course sympathized with the local people, and had visited their barricades and brought food and money donations over the past 1-2 days.

But late today, we missed the confrontation by a few minutes. When we were driving there, we met convoys of police vans on the way out. The boulevard was full, not unlike a mini "people power" event. The Tanbacan road was even fuller.

What we heard was that the mayor's administrator Atty Vivar had a scuffle with a Monsignor from the opposing side, then all hell broke loose. Atty Vivar allegedly left the scene, and when the police realized their leader was gone, they decided to leave. Perhaps it was good we missed all that action. Could have been hit by flying stones or a police truncheon.

Later that night, we saw most of the verbal confrontation on local TV, but the melee wasn't shown. Already, this issue has caught the attention of the national media and even foreign environmental groups. There might be more action to come.

Below is Google map with self explanatory notes added. Further below are more photos and commentary.





The Boulevard looking southward sometime last year.



Same view earlier today with onlookers milling around.



The first barricade at Tambacan road.



More posters and barricades.



More barricades.



A more specific poster.



Balikbayans meeting the protesters at their tent.



Some of the protesters, looking grim and determined.



The dredging barge moored off shore. Far from the river.



The Sino Italy plant further out.



Entrance sign. Doesn't say anything about river dredging.



A look inside through a hole in the high sheet metal wall.



Inside the plant's compound, showing what appears to be a conveyor on left and pipeline on right.



View at road soon after the confrontation, with protesters and their supporters still milling around.





Another view.



In pink is the Monsignor mentioned earlier above.



Lisa seated in tent listening to radio about the event.



Photo of TV screen later that night showing phalanx of police ready to break up the barricade.



City chief engineer Chester Reyes leading his crew of helmeted clean-up workers ready to remove barricades, on local TV. It didn't happen.



Start of the showdown, on local TV. Soon after, Mayor Lawrence Teves appeared on TV explaining their side.