

El Nido forest occupants next

As beachfront establishments tear down structures, gov't focus shifts to timberland areas

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PUERTO PRINCESA CITY—



As errant businesses along El Nido town's iconic Bacquit Bay started demolishing their structures for violating the 3-meter easement rule, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources is stepping up its crackdown on illegal occupants of timberlands. It also warned defiant El Nido busi

A11 nesses their permits would be canceled.

PUERTO PRINCESA CITY— Most of the establishments cited for violations by the environment department along the iconic Bacquit Bay in El Nido town, Palawan province, have demolished their structures as the agency steps up its crackdown on illegal occupants of timberland areas.

The Task Force El Nido, in a report on Tuesday, said 24 of 32 errant businesses along the town's cove have started demolishing their structures, in compliance with the notice to vacate issued by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) regional office in Mimaropa (Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon and Palawan) last month. The DENR-led task force gave the establishments until April 11 to demolish.

The El Nido government, in a separate statement, also warned it would cancel the permits of other establishments that would defy the order.

Easement violation

The affected establishments were cited mostly for violating the 3-meter easement provided in the Philippine Water Code, while several had been cited for improper waste management and for operating without permits.

The El Nido cleanup campaign was initiated by the DENR, following President Duterte's order on the temporary closure of Boracay Island in Aklan province because of its environmental degradation.

Natividad Bernardino, DENR Mimaropa director, said the agency had started issuing notices of violations to inlandbased establishments, including residences and a public school, occupying what was classified in official government maps as timberland areas.

The task force said it had issued 364 notices to vacate to 84 establishments, including highend and budget resorts, and 262 houses, mostly in the village of Corong-Corong at the interior portion of the town.

Fairness

"We cannot be but fair in the application of law. We have been issuing notices to vacate to all those encroaching on easement zones and timberlands. The burden of proof is on those who claim to have legal basis for occupation of timberland," Bernardino said.

According to Bernardino, the DENR issued a violation notice to the town's main public high school, El Nido National High School, because it sits on a timberland.

"Of course we are aware that the school provides a public good that is why we will recommend that it secure a presidential proclamation to declare the area it occupies a civil reservation. But as a matter of course, too, we have to serve it a notice to vacate because it is built on timberland without any tenorial instrument," Bernardino said.

Manuel Escasura, head of the task force, said establishments that were issued notices had failed to show proof of valid occupation of their property.

Exemption

He said the task force exempted those occupying public lands but had tenorial instruments such as Forest Land Use Agreements for Tourism purposes.

Some establishments affected by the DENR action have appealed their violation notices, claiming they have valid titles over the property that they developed.

El Nido Mayor Nieves Rosento urged the DENR to reconsider its eviction orders in the Corong-Corong area, claiming that most property owners had been issued titles by the DENR itself. She said the area was classified under the town's comprehensive land use plan as a "multiple use" zone.

The DENR earlier said it would review the land titles, insisting that Corong-Corong was still officially classified as a public land.