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A6

DENR to shut down 51 Boracay polluters

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Fifty-one establishments operating on Boracay Island are facing closure after being found to have no wastewater treatment facilities and dumping sewage into the sea, according to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR).

The announcement of the move against the erring establishments came days after President Duterte directed the environment department to clean up Boracay, which he compared to a "cesspool," or he would shut down the world-famous island in six months.

Mr. Duterte ordered Environment Secretary Roy Cimatu to "destroy" establishments in Boracay that violated environmental and health regulations.

He also warned that charges would be filed against local officials in Boracay for neglect of duty in connection with the island's environmental problems.

Clean Water Act

The 51 establishments were served notices, dated Feb. 13, for violating Chapter 5, Section 27 of the implementing rules and regulations of Republic Act No. 9275, or the Clean Water Act of 2004, the DENR Western Visayas said in a report to the central office in Quezon City.

Under the law, establishments and households are mandated to dispose of their septic waste through a treatment facility.

In a statement on Tuesday, Cimatu said that while 50 to 60 percent of all establishments in Boracay appeared to be compliant with the requirement, "all the rest direct their pipes to the canals, which drain to the sea."

Cimatu said the notices of violation would be issued to establishments that were illegally connected or not connected at all to the sewage treatment plant of Boracay Island Water Co.

5 days to respond

"We will give these establishments three to five days to respond. Otherwise, we will cut their water connections," Cimatu said.

He said the erring establishments would be given two months to either connect to the sewage treatment plant or install their own wastewater treatment facilities. "Otherwise, we will close them," he said.

The DENR did not identify the 51 erring establishments.

Aside from the sewage problem, Cimatu said the DENR would go after resort owners who had constructed buildings within areas classified as no-build zone forest lands.

Cimatu has ordered that no new environmental compliance certificates will be issued in Boracay to prevent the construction of new buildings.

'Corrupt officials'

In Boracay, the President's warning to charge local officials has drawn support from residents, including expatriates.

"I agree. Most of them (local officials) are corrupt. They never

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think of the consequence and keep on issuing building permits," said one resident, who requested not to be named for fear of reprisal.

At the inauguration of a help desk at Vicente Sotto Memorial Medical Center in Cebu City on Monday, Mr. Duterte said, "I will charge you with serious neglect of duty for making Boracay a sewer pool."

He blamed the "local governments and the people" in Boracay for the environmental problems of the 1,032-hectare island.

"You allowed the building of structures overlapping the coastline and already reaching the sea, which is not really allowed," he said.

An expatriate, who has been living on the island for more than 20 years, said Mr. Duterte's threat could help in the short run in dealing with the perennial problems of the island.

Complacent, votes

"The local officials, including those at the local and provincial levels, have been complacent, helpless and easily impressed by big businesses," said an expatriate, who asked not to be named for his safety. "They come from a few intertwined clans who are easily blackmailed by interest groups because they need their votes to stay in power."

Tourist arrivals on the island reached 2,001,974 last year, 16 percent higher than the 1,725,483 tourists in 2016.

A former tourism official said the local officials "have been extremely remiss in their duties," adding that "there is a great deal of corruption there that has piled up since four decades ago."

But the former official said cases should be filed not only against corrupt and negligent local officials but also against those in the DENR for "sleeping on the job."

Governor, mayor

The Inquirer tried to reach for comment Aklan Gov. Florencio Miraflores and Mayor Ciceron Cawaling of Malay town, where Boracay Island is administered, but they did not respond.

Amid the President's threat to close down Boracay, a group of business owners on the island called on the national government to close down establishments that violated laws and regulations.

But the Boracay Foundation Inc. is against shutting down the entire island, saying Mr. Duterte is being given wrong information. INQ