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Bishops challenge British investment in 'destructive mining'

By Ellen Teague

Three bishops from the Philippines and Australia issued a challenge at the Houses of Parliament yesterday, to end British investment in destructive mining.

The meeting was chaired by Clare Short, former Secretary of State for International Development. "Please help us to stop destructive mining in our country; it is a lie to say that poor people are being helped by it," said Bishop Juan de Dios M. Pueblos of Batuan in the Southern Philippine island of Mindanao.

"The small islands in the Philippine archipelago can easily be destroyed" he added, calling for "genuine development that upholds human dignity, is compatible with the ecological integrity and ensures the well-being of future generations".

He reported that large-scale mining has given the Philippines a "scarring" experience with toxic poisoning from mine tailings and flooding of villages. Mining activities have depleted natural resources, posed ill effects on health and led to increased militarization. "My plea is for Christian globalisation," he added, "and you people can help us protect our country through challenging British investment in destructive mining companies".

Bishop Dinualdo Gutierrez of Marbel in Mindanao explained how the Catholic bishops of Mindanao have joined forces to stop the open-pit copper and gold mining operation of Xstrata, an Anglo-Swiss company.

The bishops recently led some 8,000 protesters who staged a rally in front of the mining office in the town of Tampakan, and reiterated the call of the entire Bishops' Conference of the Philippines for the repeal of the 1995 Mining Act, which opened the country up to foreign mining companies. He showed images of people covered in sores and fish stocks poisoned to show the links between leaks of toxic mine wastes, such as cyanide, and the loss of health and livelihoods of local communities. Both bishops were wearing Episcopal crosses made of bamboo instead of metal mined underground. Bishop Gutierrez too stressed the importance of "networking with foreign advocates".

"People in so-called 'developed' countries have missed the plot on the long-term future," Bishop Christopher Toohey of Wilcannia-Forbes diocese in rural Australia told the gathering of more than 50 representatives of Christian organisations and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales.

The Chair of Catholic Earthcare Australia explained how global warming has contributed to severe water shortage in his diocese and he encouraged his listeners to reflect upon how western lifestyles have contributed to increasingly heavy carbon emissions. "Jesus never said the way to holiness was through excessive consumption" he pointed out.

Clare Short, who chairs the Working Group on Mining in the Philippines - which includes the Columban Missionary Society, the Ecumenical Council for Corporate Responsibility, Philippine Indigenous Peoples' Links and IUCN- CEESP - urged the gathering to work together for sustainable development that takes human rights and the welfare of the natural world into consideration. This

would mean, “working for the transformation that this agenda throws up,” including personal lifestyle changes and putting pressure on politicians and business leaders to respond to unsustainable development and climate change. She thanked all three bishops for their leadership in offering a Catholic response to the world’s environmental challenges.