

The investigating panel of the City Council (Sangguniang Panlungsod) of Zamboanga City has cleared the mining company from accusations of contaminating Vitali river saying "we found out that Atro Mining has nothing to do with the issue of deaths of prawns and crabs" in the area.

Councilor Charlie Mariano, in an interview, said the investigating panel has "found out that there is nothing irregular with the exploration activities of the company as it complies with all the requirements and guidelines" of the Mines and Geosciences Bureau (MGB).

"We found out it has nothing to do with the issues of the deaths of prawns and crabs in Vitali," Councilor Mariano, chair of the Committee of Environment and Natural Resources, told newsmen at the end of the on-site investigation held Feb. 15.

The city councilor said they will be preparing the final report of the investigation to be submitted to the City Council and the office of Mayor Maria Isabelle Climaco-Salazar as a basis for decision on how to address the problem.

Present during the one-day investigation at the exploration site of Atro Mining-Vitali, Inc. (AMVI) were Councilors Roel Natividad, Benjamin Guingona, Miguel Alavar III, Kim Elago, Percival Ramos, Charlie Mariano, Luis Biel, Josephine Pareja, Rodolfo Bayot, and Liga ng mga Barangay President Jerry Perez. Also present were representatives from the regional office of MGB and members of the local and national media.

Councilor Luis Biel said he is satisfied with what he had seen in the area.

"Before this site visit, I have a different picture on what is happening but I am now convinced that the company has nothing to do with the problem," Biel said.

It can be seen from the clean and clear water of the river and as well as the green mountains where the exploration activities of the company has been undertaken, he added.

"It is clear to me that the company has conducted its activities responsibly," he said.

AMVI President Mr. Elson S. Ogario, when informed of the results of the investigation, said "all the while, the company is confident that it will come out clean and vindicated amid allegations that our mining exploration in Vitali has caused the problem."

"This is a sort of vindication and an affirmation of our company's commitment to transparency and accountability as we pursue our company's objectives," Ogario said.

Agriculture and fishery experts said the infestation of shrimps and crabs in Vitali village was caused White Spots Syndrome Virus (WSSV).

Dr. Art Panganiban of Zamboanga State of Marine Sciences and Technology said the problem is caused by WSSV based on the observed symptoms from the samples.

The main manifestation of the disease is the white spots mark in the head and tail of the infected shrimp.

Panganiban's assessment was in agreement with the finding of Agriculture Officer Rico Tabal. Tabal, head of the Field Agriculture Office 6 based in Barangay Vitali, issued the warning of possible outbreak and infestation crustacean specie by WSSV after he received reports of deaths of shrimps and crabs in the area.

Tabal said his office is very aware of the possible onset of WSSV infestations "during this time of the year in 2013, and is likely to hit again this year the local prawn farming industry."

Records show that WSSV infestation also hit the fishpond operators of Vitali in September 2011.

Experts said the virus is known to occur in fresh, brackish and marine water. They said the disease appears to be induced by environmental and handling stress such as eye-stalk ablation, spawning, moulting, and changes in salinity, temperature and acid level of water during plankton blooms especially with the onset of summer.

Ogario, however, said the company is open to any form of cooperation and collaboration with the government "to collectively address the issue for the good of the people".— Antonio Manaytay/Atro Mining