

Cordillera Day 2011

BRIEF PROFILE OF THE AREA AND THE HOST COMMUNITY

Cordillera Day 2011 will be celebrated in Lacub, Abra, and hosted by TULBEK (meaning *key*; short for *Timpuyog dagiti Umili iti Lacub, Bantayan Ekolohiya ken Kinabaknang*, which translates as *Lacub People's Federation for Ecological and Resource Protection*).

Lacub is a small municipality of thirteen villages administered as the *sitios* of six *barangay* (the basic administrative unit in the Philippine local government system).

BARANGAY	SITIOS/VILLAGES	LAND AREA (km ²)	POPULATION
Bacag	Bacag	32.95	213
Buneg	Buneg, Sap-al, and Talipugo	183.78	881
Guinguinabang	Balaoang, Guinguinabang, and Libsong	14	256
Lan-ag	Ambalag, Lablabinag, and Lan-ag	35.82	396
Pacoc	Pacoc and Talampac	13.75	500
Poblacion	Poblacion	15	804
TOTAL		295.3	3,050

Sources: Lacub Municipal Profile 2003 and National Statistics Office Census 2007

Each of the villages or *sitios* has a peasant community organization, and the thirteen organizations comprise TULBEK. One of these is the Buneg Farmers' Association, in whose village the Cordillera Day celebration will take place.

Buneg is a small community of 66 households. Fifty of these households are composed of nuclear families, while sixteen are extended.

The municipality is occupied by three Tinggian sub-groups: the Binongan, whose ancestors were the first occupants of the Binongan river valley of northeastern Abra; the Adasen, who are related to the Isneg of western Apayao; and the Mabaca, who are related to the Kalinga of northwestern Kalinga. Although Adasen once lived in Buneg, the area is now occupied by a homogenous Mabaca community. It is said that the area was overrun, and the Adasen were displaced, by the Mabaca when this tribal people aggressively expanded from their territory in Kalinga some time in the 19th century.

Later in that century, the *mannakem* (wise persons) of Buneg gained renown for their shrewd judgement and fairness in decision-making. Buneg became a center for the dispensation of justice in northeastern Abra: people in the surrounding areas came to Buneg to have its *mannakem* resolve inter-tribal or inter-community conflict, settle various types of dispute, and try criminal cases. They even sought the Buneg *mannakem*'s insight in their formulation of community policies. A present-day elder claims that this is the reason why Buneg retained its Adasen name – *bonog* meaning *gathering*. The Adasen originally gave Buneg this name because it was a place where frogs gathered during the wet season.

The Mabaca developed Buneg as a wet-rice producing settlement. But like the Adasen, who to this day remain rotational shifting cultivators of swiddens, the Mabaca also grew rice on freshly cleared mountain slopes. The expansion of pondfields continues among the present-day Mabaca of Buneg. But swidden farming has dwindled. It has been replaced by a limited amount of backyard gardening. This is

largely due to increased allocation of household labor to small-scale gold mining. Only very large, extended-family households can still afford to allot time and energy to all the current labor-intensive pursuits of the Lacub peasantry – small-scale gold mining, wet-rice culture, swidden farming, backyard gardening, plus livestock raising.

All Lacub is rich in gold ore deposits. Indigenous and migrant small-scale miners currently operate 14 sites distributed throughout the municipality. Three of these are in the Buneg area: Bila, Magtatalang, and Bumurayok. The last, along with two other sites in the vicinity of Talampac and the Poblacion, have been targeted for exploration then exploitation by Golden Lake Mineral Resources, a new large mining firm owned by Miguel M. Peña, scion of a politically powerful *hacienda*-owning clan in the Visayas. A number of other large miners have staked their claims on Lacub – among these the Titan Exploration and Development Corporation.

Both Lacub's Mayor, Estelita Bersamina, and its Vice-Mayor, Leo Baroña, have publicly welcomed the entry of large mining into their municipality, saying that they believe it will bring progress and prosperity to its constituency. Abra's Governor, Eustaquio Bersamin, shares this belief. These officials do not seem to realize that people in other parts of the country which have been heavily mined for decades – e.g. Tuba, Itogon, Tublay, Kibungan, and Mankayan in Benguet here in the Cordillera region; Marinduque, one of the small islands south of Luzon; Toledo on the island of Cebu in the Visayas – have all been left poorer, rather than richer, by large mining because of the devastation this extractive industry has wrought on their land and other livelihood resources.

One of the big attractions for the local government officials is Peña's promise to include in Golden Lake's mine development plans the repair of the Lacub road and the construction of a bridge across the Malanas river at Abubutoc that will be big enough for vehicular traffic.

The road to Lacub, like the roads to all Tinggian municipalities in upland Abra, is in a state of disrepair. This is partly due to the negligence of the state, and partly to graft and corruption at all levels of Philippine government.

The attraction that infrastructure development holds for a neglected municipality, and the pressure that local officials are bringing to bear on the citizenry by openly endorsing Golden Lake, both diminish the freedom of the indigenous peoples of Lacub to decide on the issue of large mining in their ancestral domain.

Complicating the situation is the militarization of the province. Almost all local politicians maintain private armies. In addition, two battalions of the Philippine Army's 5th Infantry Division have been fielded here – the 41st IB in the north and the 50th IB in the south – along with a counter-insurgency strike force, the 52nd DRC (Division Reconnaissance Company), plus a company of the 77th IB, which serves as the cadre corps for the paramilitary CAFGU (Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Units). Their mission is to wipe out the revolutionary NPA (New People's Army), which has a significant force in the province. Their aim is to enable so-called developers, such as the large mining companies, to operate here without fear of being stopped in their tracks and driven out by the NPA.

Lacub is surrounded by large semi-permanent detachments of the Philippine Army – in the municipalities of Lagangilang, Baay-Licuan, and Malibcong. From time to time, the Philippine Army fields platoons to Lacub, to undertake counter-insurgency operations. In 2008, an SOT (Special

Operations Team) of the 41st IB held the village of Talampac under siege for a full year, until its community organization broke down. It is still striving to recover.

But the capacity of the indigenous peoples of Lacub to consolidate their strength and assert their right of ancestral domain should not be underestimated. Lacub's citizens have had a long history of struggling to defend land and life. Lacub was the center of the successful Tinggian resistance to the logging operations of the Marcos dictatorship's Cellophil Resources Corporation. Lacub communities again played a crucial role in preventing various administrations from implementing Marcos's plan to dam the Binongan river. The community of Buneg, in particular, has twice in recent years stood up to a local warlord and stopped him from seizing their small-scale mining sites.

This year's Cordillera Day will be both a celebration of the indigenous peoples of Lacub's glorious history of resistance and an expression of solidarity with them in their current struggle.

The trip will be long and rather hard: it takes six hours to travel from Manila or four hours from Baguio to Bangued, the provincial capital of Abra. Lacub is only a short distance from there, but rough road conditions make travel four to five hours long. If rains have not swelled the Binongan river, the road can take you as far as Buneg. Otherwise, you will have to walk forty minutes to Buneg from the Lacub Poblacion.

At present, there is no regular source of electricity in Buneg: there are solar chargers, but not all households have these, and when the day's supply of sunlight has been low, the electricity cannot last overnight. ABRELCO (the Abra Electric Cooperative) has been planning to extend its services to Buneg, though. Let us hope that by Cordillera Day, it will have implemented this plan.

The cellular communications signal of Globe Telecom is accessible in Buneg, but at only two points: the front of a dilapidated old schoolhouse and a little spot to one side of the village *plaza*, where you can leave your cellphone hanging from branches taken from a tree to pick up your messages.

