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Filipino priest wins environmental award for work against nickel mine

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Gariguez Book Launch (courtesy of goldmanprize.org) Filipino Fr. Edwin Gariguez, a recipient of the 2012 Goldman Environmental Prize, presents "Mindoro Campaign: Defending People's Rights, Protecting the Island Ecology," a book documenting the struggle of the Mangyan people and supporters against destructive mining. (goldmanprize.org)

MANILA, Philippines -- A priest whose work protecting the environment by leading a grassroots movement was named Monday as one of six winners of the 2012 Goldman Environmental Prize, which honors grassroots environmental heroes from Africa, Asia, Europe, the Islands and Island Nations, North America and South and Central America.

Fr. Edwin Gariguez, 49, executive secretary of the Episcopal Commission on Social Action, Justice and Peace, was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize for "fearless" leadership in protecting the environment and his community, the Goldman Environmental Foundation announced Monday.

The foundation noted the priest's leadership in a grassroots movement to protect the biodiversity of Mindoro Island in the northwestern Philippines as well as its indigenous Mangyan people from an illegal

nickel mine.

"We are very happy that he got that significant international prize," said Auxiliary Bishop Broderick Pabillo of Manila, Gariguez's bishops' commission chairman.

Pabillo said the award shows the group's "recognition of what we are doing in Mindoro, protecting the indigenous people and protecting the environment especially against large-scale mining."

"We hope that this can be a big sign for people that there are others outside the Philippines who appreciate what we are doing to preserve the environment," the bishop said Tuesday.

Gariguez, nicknamed Father Edu, served as administrator of Mangyan Mission before he was appointed executive secretary of the Episcopal Commission on Social Action, Justice and Peace and its National Secretariat for Social Action in 2010.

He had come out of an 11-day anti-mining hunger strike with 25 Mangyans less than three months earlier to stop operations of the Norwegian mining company Intex.

No to Intex

The Goldman prize cited Gariguez's struggle in the late 1990s against Intex, then known as Mindex, when the company proposed to build an open-pit nickel mine near two biodiversity areas, using acid leaching process to reach mineral ores. The process would produce toxic waste.

Gariguez co-founded the Alliance Against Mining, a broad coalition of thousands of Mindoro residents, elected officials, civil society groups, church leaders and indigenous people who oppose mining on the island. Activists protesting with the group reportedly received threats of violence and verbal harassment.

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After successful campaigns, the local government imposed a moratorium on mining on the island in 2002, a move Intex ignored, according to the Goldman Environmental Foundation's website. Gariguez went to Europe to address Norwegian parliamentarians and Intex shareholders and, with a Norwegian NGO, filed a complaint with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, according to the foundation.

In 2009, Gariguez led an 11-day hunger strike until the Philippines' Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) agreed to look into the alleged environmental and social violations of mining operations.

The department then indefinitely revoked Intex's permit and stopped mining operations, the prize's site states. Major funders, including Goldman Sachs, took away the company's funding, leading Intex to make an unsuccessful attempt to sell the \$2.4 billion project in 2010. Shortly after the botched sale, Intex's CEO resigned because of "severe setbacks," according to the foundation.

For Judy Pasimio, who campaigned with Gariguez and the Alliance Against Mining, the award also "recognizes the contribution of the Church to ending the Mangyan's struggle with Intex."

"This struggle is not just about protecting the environment, but is really about the survival of the Mangyans, which Father Edu and the church fought for," Pasimio told *NCR* on Tuesday.

Clergy activism

Pasimio said Gariguez's award highlights the role of the "barefoot priest."

"He is an example of the priest who does not just stand and preach in the pulpit, but who is really in touch 'with the people' he is serving," she said.

Scenes from the 2009 hunger strike linger vividly in Pasimio's memory, she said.

"After a few days, many people dropped out of the fast and headed back to Mindoro, but Father Edu would not leave as long as there were Mangyans protesting," she said.

Pasimio said she remembered Gariguez ignoring advice to lie down and conserve his energy during the hunger strike.

"He took public transport to radio stations, giving interviews," and to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources to meet with the department secretary.

"That is what the hunger strike is for, to draw attention to the Mangyans' plight and press authorities, but we thought he could leave that to other people, since he would be feeling frail from fasting," she said.

But, she said, "seeing the Mangyans seemed to boost his energy."

In his acceptance message, Gariguez offered his prize to Mangyan people.

"It's not only money that counts for them, but also the spirit ties with the land, which mining companies do not understand," he told *NCR* before he received the award.

"It is very clear in the social teachings of the Church we are to take into consideration human rights, particularly of (indigenous people), and ensure that these would not be sacrificed for us to attract investment for corporations to profit," Gariguez said.

Goldman Prize winners

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The Goldman Environmental Prize, now on its 23rd year, was established in 1989 by late San Francisco civic leaders and philanthropists Richard and Rhoda Goldman. The other award recipients, who were selected by an international jury, are:

- Ikal Angelei of Kenya, who is risking her life fighting the construction of the massive Gibe 3 Dam, which would block access to water for indigenous communities around Lake Turkana.
- Ma Jun of China, who is working with corporations to clean up their practices with an online database and digital map showing which factories are violating China's environmental regulations.
- Evgenia Chirikova of Russia, who is mobilizing fellow Russians to demand rerouting of a highway that would bisect Khimki Forest, Moscow's "green lungs."
- Caroline Cannon of the United States, who is battling with her Inupiat community in Point Hope in the Arctic Circle to keep Arctic waters safe from offshore oil and gas drilling.
- Sofia Gatica, an Argentine mother who, after losing her infant to pesticide poisoning, is organizing local women to stop indiscriminate spraying of toxic agrochemicals in neighboring soy fields.

Each winner will receive \$150,000.

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