



Resource Development (Phils.) Inc.

NEWS RELEASE

An abantero learns his lesson the hard way



It was a hard lesson in life for Jerry Ontolan -- a former 'abantero' -- after he lost his right leg due to an accident while working in the illegal mining area in Sitio Balabag, Bayog, Zamboanga del Sur.

Upon learning from his attending doctor that his right leg will be amputated, Jerry Ontolan's world suddenly crumbled. For him it was the most depressing moment in his life. His depression was aggravated when he saw his amputated leg and realized that he is now permanently disabled.

Jerry was an "*abantero*" – or one who digs inside makeshift deep tunnels of the illegal miners using crude digging instruments. He worked with an illegal mining operator in the mineral-rich mountain of Sitio Balabag in Bayog, Zamboanga del Sur.

A resident of Bara-bara, Barangay Sicayab, Dipolog City, Jerry ventured to Sitio Balabag in 2004, hoping that he would strike fortune in the gold-rich enclave of Bayog.

In June this year, together with a co-worker, Jerry was working inside a tunnel allegedly owned by an illegal contractor. Since his arrival in Balabag, he has been hoping everyday for a lucky strike so he can finance the small business he has been dreaming since having his own family.

They entered the 20-foot deep tunnel with high hopes to find gold. "The tunnel was deep but as an *abantero*, it is our way of earning a living," he said.

It was raining at that time as the two were chiseling a boulder they knew contained gold when a big rock unexpectedly fell and rolled right towards Jerry, eventually pinning his right leg. Unable to free his leg, he shouted for help to his companion moments before he lost consciousness.

"I did not know what happened next. I fell unconscious," he recalled.

According to Joan, 18, his common-law wife, Jerry's right leg dangled as he was pulled and carried out from the deep tunnel by his companions. "I was very nervous because he seemed dead," she added.

He was immediately brought to a nearby hospital in Diplahan town in Zamboanga Sibugay.

Fellow *abanteros*, who literally carried him on a hammock, had to pass through rugged hills and difficult trails instead of the easier roads in order to avoid getting caught. Their illegal mining financiers warned them earlier to never let security personnel from TVI Resources Development (Philippines) Inc. (TVIRD) know of their purpose. They didn't want the police or government men to know of accidents happening inside the illegal mining area.

"He was concealed by the illegal miners so that TVIRD people will not know about the incident," she said.

In Zamboanga del Sur Provincial Hospital in Pagadian City where he was treated, doctors decided to amputate his right leg due to the severe, inoperable wounds. His leg sustained bone fractures and shattered ligaments because of the massive rock that fell on it.

"We are left with no choice but to amputate your right leg so you will live," the doctor told him. Jerry, with much hesitation at first, finally let go of his right leg.

The accident cast a dark cloud on Jerry's dreams to live a comfortable life with Joan, who is a resident of Barangay Labrador, Buug, Zamboanga Sibugay.

Faced with the stark reality that his chances for better life are already slim, Jerry turned to God to be able to accept his present disability and that his young wife will not leave him.

When he and Joan chanced upon retired Col. Val Edang, Officer-in-Charge of TVIRD's Balabag Gold-Silver Project, they did not hesitate to ask for help so he and his family can return home to Dipolog City. Going home may help him forget the painful experience in Balabag.

"There in that mountain (Balabag), money is very quick. But the prices of consumer goods are high because traders would tell us it is difficult to transport the goods to the area. There are no good roads, no health services. *Abanteros* worked hard but still end up penniless. It happened to me, and it happened to other *abanteros* too," lamented Jerry.

Now with one good leg, Jerry continues to hope for a better life. However, with his every limping step using his crutches, he is forever reminded that once he was tempted and enamored by the gleam of illegal gold and easy money. But regrettably, he paid for it dearly.

About TVI

TVI Resource Development (Phils.) Inc., is the Philippine affiliate of TVI Pacific Inc. (TSX: TVI), a publicly-listed Canadian mining company focused on the exploration and production of precious and base metals from district scale large system, high margin projects located in the Philippines.

We are committed to exploration and mining practices that promote transparency, responsible stewardship of the environment, and the inalienable rights to life, dignity, and sustainable development of our host communities.

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For media queries:

Dennis Baguio

Public Affairs Officer

TVI Resource Development (Phils) Inc.

Public Affairs Department

Balabag Gold-Silver Project

Bayog, Zamboanga del Sur

dennis.baguio@tvipacific.com.ph

0917.316.5822