

On My Mind
by Ruth L. Tighe

After a week's stay on Saipan spent meeting with government officials, interviewing affected village families, inspecting contaminated sites, collecting soil samples, discussing strategy with community leaders, visiting local classrooms, taking pictures, taping sound bites, and sharing information with all who would listen, three Greenpeace members returned to their headquarters in Fiji the end of February to consult with home office staff as to how and what they could do to help the people of Tanapag get rid of the PCB's that have contaminated their village for the last 12 years.

This week, in consultation with village activists, Greenpeace took a major step on behalf of Tanapag residents: it issued a press release citing Tanapag as a "global toxic hotspot" and calling on the US Government to "clean up its mess there." "Since the PCB contamination was discovered 10 years ago, the remediation effort has been pitiful," said the press release.

Of major concern are the piles of highly toxic soil in and near the village cemetery left behind by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers after the latest remediation attempt. No date has been set for their removal. Yet less than six months from now, the cemetery will see significant activity, as villagers spend time at the site to clean the gravesites and cemetery in preparation for the observance of All Souls' Day on the first of November.

Reaction of CNMI government officials to the "toxic hotspot" announcement has been ambivalent, to put it kindly. The Chairman of the Marianas Visitors Authority complained, in an account carried in the <I>Variety</I>, that the story would adversely affect tourist travel to the CNMI. (As though tourists' welfare was more important than that of Tanapag residents). Though the chairman did say that "Much as MVA is concerned about the tourism industry, we also want the residents of Tanapag to live comfortably." "Comfortably" is not the issue here.....

The acting governor, on his part, insisted that the Greenpeace declaration "should not be seen as an effort to pressure the U.S. government into taking appropriate action," according to another story in the<I>Variety</I>. To the contrary, the lieutenant governor is quoted as saying, the problem is well known, the federal government is doing its part, and "we [in the CNMI] are doing our part. We are not sitting idle."

Either the lieutenant governor is sadly mis-informed, or he is not the least sympathetic to or concerned about the many problems residents of Tanapag continue to endure as a result of the excesses of hazardous waste in their midst. Let us hope it is the former, and not the latter.

Tanapag villagers, on the other hand, are cheered that the PCB issue is, at long last, gaining attention. They are pleased that it has been given the Greenpeace "stamp of concern." They are hopeful that the attention will spread, will finally create enough pressure to force prompt and effective action from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, will finally bring meaningful results. And they are grateful to Greenpeace for its assistance in gaining a wider audience for their

long-standing concern about the PCB contamination in their village.

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This is Holy Week. It is the week the sailors from Puluwat and Satawal - despite minor problems and delays - arrived safely at Tanapag. It is the week Greenpeace gave Tanapag the distinction of being labelled a world "hotspot." It's the final week before my departure for nearly two weeks to Hong Kong and Beijing, China. A week for lots of faxing and e-mailing. In the middle of which - on my only free morning at home - MTC cut off my phone.

MTC, which has a monopoly on local phone service, recently shortened the time period between the mailing out of its bill, and the payment due date. It is not clear why it chose to do that - what it hoped to accomplish. From what I've heard, all it has done is jam the parking lot and surrounding area, and cram the office every month with people making their in-person payments on the due date. I pride myself on being more modern than that. Naively, as it turns out, I pay by check - through the mail.

Last month, when I got a warning that my payment was overdue, I was upset, knowing that I had mailed my check - only to be told that in the meantime, my payment had been received and not to worry. So this month when I again got a warning notice, knowing I had sent off my payment, I didn't worry. But this time, thanks to a week-end interval, thanks to once-a-day mail pick up at my post office branch and thanks to my having missed Monday's pick-up, my check did not make it to MTC by its arbitrary cut-off date. So MTC cut off my service - and I a customer who had made each and every payment on time and in full for over 15 years. I could not believe it.

Standing in line at MTC to get my phone reconnected, I learned from a friend in line for a different reason, that it was possible to avoid the hassle of trying to making sure payments reach MTC in time by authorizing MTC to charge my monthly phone bill to a credit card. That only added fuel to the fire - why hadn't MTC told me that? At the window, the clerk informed me that my payment had still not reached MTC. She said that in order to get phone service restored I would have to make another payment. So I wrote another check. When the clerk confirmed that MTC did indeed accept credit card payments, I gave her a credit card. She asked if I wanted this month's bill charged. Having already written the check, I could only glare.

I realized, after I'd calmed down, that I may no longer have to worry about paying MTC on time, but if I don't pay my credit card balance in full each month, I will now be paying interest on my MTC bill. On top of that, now I have to worry about getting my credit card paid on time or MTC will still cut off my phone. And I don't even have the credit card that gives airline mileage credit for purchases.

It's bad enough that MTC bills aren't stamped as to when they're actually mailed (or at least my last one wasn't - and I've been told the bills don't always all get out by the first of the month as they are supposed to). Nor, of course, is there any indication as to when my bill actually gets put into my mailbox - particularly since I don't pick up my mail every day. Nor is there any way of knowing how long it takes my payment to get from my branch office to MTC's offices in Gualo

Rai. But what, to me, is most galling of all is that having a perfect payment record (at least as far as MTC is concerned) doesn't count at all.

Now MTC has announced that it is going to begin charging its customers for 411 calls - on the presumption that the phone book includes "all of the current phone numbers for CNMI customers." That's the new phone book, whose existence is yet to be publicly announced..

In my opinion MTC needs a total re-vamp of its customer communications services, not to mention a full re-assessment of its customer service policies. Or better yet, some real competition for its local service.

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Wouldn't you think that the Marianas Visitors Bureau would want tourists - either those already on island, or those considered likely candidates - to know where the CNMI is? Oddly enough, it seems not. The office offers a multitude of pamphlets and brochures in English, Japanese and Korean - the Stewart's Historical and Geographical Tourist Map, a brochure on "History and Culture," another on "General Information," and a pocket-sized mini-booklet called "Marianas Guide - Saipan-Tinian-Rota" among others.

Yet in only one of them is there a graphic of any sort that shows the location of the CNMI relative to anyplace else - Stewart's large fold-out map contains a small inset. None of the MVB's slick, commercial publications provide a view of even the western Pacific, much less any indication of proximity to Japan, or to the Philippine Islands, to Korea, or Indonesia, or Australia, or China, or even to the rest of Micronesia.....

Only the business cards show the CNMI in relation to anyplace else. Weird.