

On My Mind
8/4/00

Despite Representative Dino M. Jones' focus on filing a lawsuit in regard to the PCB contamination of Tanapag village, a much higher priority, it seems to me, is making sure that all of the contaminated soil in the village is found, removed and properly destroyed, and that everyone who has been affected by the contamination is given prompt and proper treatment.

Going to the courts for restitution of damages is not only a risky business, because no one can predict how much a jury might decide those damages are worth, or even what, exactly, the jury might consider constitutes damage, but also because, more often than not, going to court becomes a very long drawn-out process, and can take as much as ten years or more to settle. Just look at the Marshall Islands, where full restitution for damages resulting from nuclear testing has not yet been made.

The villagers of Tanapag should not have to wait for a request for proposal to be drawn up and issued, for responses to be ranked and a law firm selected, for contract negotiations, for the information gathering that will have to be done (again!), for the identification of witnesses, the filing of interrogatories and taking of depositions, the endless court battles over legal technicalities and technical legalities.

Help and relief for the villagers of Tanapag is already long over-due. They should not be expected to wait even longer. The villagers of Tanapag are entitled to help now. The contaminated soil must be removed now. Whatever treatments are available to those afflicted must begin now.

A law suit at this point does neither. It will only detract time, attention, resources and personnel from the real issue: removing the PCB-contaminated soil, treating the contaminated water, healing the sick.

The focus of the CNMI administration and its agencies, of the legislature and its members, should be on direct action, on the performance of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and its contractor(s), and on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Their focus should be on how quickly, how safely, and how thoroughly, the contaminated soil is identified, removed, and destroyed, not on the performance of legal gymnastics that, all too often, enriches the legal profession at the expense of its victims.

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If you've not already done so, we would encourage you to look at the Greenpeace site on the web. At the moment, it is full of stories and references to their actions here in Tanapag.

People may wonder why such a large organization is spending so much time on such a tiny village. The answer is that Tanapag's PCB problem fits so well into a larger cause that Greenpeace is working on at the moment: calling world-wide attention to the failure of the U.S. to

support an international treaty on the elimination of persistent organic pollutants, or POPs, of which PCB is one. Four sessions have been held, world-wide, to work out the terms and conditions of the treaty. A fifth session is scheduled to be held in South Africa in December.

So far, the U.S. - and Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea - have argued that it is not necessary to cease production of the POPs - that technology exists to make their use safe and harmless. The problem is that the technology is very high-tech, is very expensive, is generally still in the experimental stage, and does not, in fact, eliminate all POPs from the atmosphere. Developing countries cannot afford such costly clean-up processes.

By showing the world the non-caring, cavalier attitude of the U.S. and its Army Corps of Engineers, its Environmental Protection Agency, toward PCB contamination in Tanapag, Greenpeace is able to demonstrate and highlight - in terms of specific acts and a particular place - just how uncooperative the U.S. is being in terms of treaty ratification.

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One of the best examples of local adoption of/adaptation to internet ways appeared in this past Monday's edition of the <I>Tribune</I>, which featured, on page 3, a story on the tipping fees about to be implemented at the Puerto Rico Dump. The story adopted a technique used on the internet with increasing frequency: FAQ's, or Frequently Asked Questions.

FAQ's are used on the internet as a short-cut for bringing users up to speed on everything from how to use newsgroups or software to fast-breaking news-stories.

The FAQ approach lists a set of basic questions in logical order, and provides the answers in short, simple, sentences that are clear, unambiguous, and easy to understand. There are no long paragraphs to wade through, no lengthy and convoluted sentences to try follow, no jargon to have to translate - just a straightforward dialogue of question and answer. The technique works very well for providing a quick understanding of a process, an event, a proposal, a new law.....

And it worked exceedingly well, in my opinion, in laying out all that is involved in the setting of tipping fees for use of the Puerto Rico dump. It provided a clear, logical, easy to understand - and persuasive - explanation of what has tended to be a rather controversial issue. Whoever put that sequence of FAQ's together deserves high praise for a job well done! As does the <I>Tribune</I> staff for laying it out so well, and providing for its appearance to begin with.

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There's a bill stuck in the House Education Committee that I hope undergoes some amendment before it comes out on the floor for vote. Senate Bill 12-38, introduced by Senate Vice-president Tom Villagomez, would provide for the inclusion of school counselors and librarians with teaching certificates in the Public School System salary schedule.

The word "librarian," however, requires definition so that professional librarians are not burdened

with unnecessary, discriminatory requirements. The formal definition of a “librarian” is one who has earned a Master’s degree in library science. One so trained has an equal, if not higher, degree than most teachers. To require librarians with Master’s degrees to also obtain a teaching certificate in order to be paid on a professional level is demeaning and belittling; it ignores the fact that librarianship is a profession in its own right, and is entitled to pay equity on that basis alone.

Many school librarians in the CNMI, however, do not have a Master’s degree; they may not have earned a BA. For such “librarians,” the requirement that they earn a teaching certificate before being paid on a professional level makes good sense.

But it will take language modification in the bill to make the distinction, and sort out the differences.

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I would refute the author of a recent letter to the editor that proposes the government save money by putting its offices and agencies into the vacant houses on Capitol Hill. Capitol Hill real estate, I would argue, is among the most valuable on island. It’s cooler up there, the lots are spacious and the views are beautiful, and so far it’s still quiet and peaceful, with no commercial traffic to speak of.

To take advantage of such valuable real estate, it seems to me, it would make a lot more sense to lease it out as private residences for as much as the traffic will bear. The income to government should be much higher than the rent saved by housing government agencies on Capitol Hill. Moreover, it would preserve a rather lovely planned, well-designed and already landscaped residential area - of which there are all too few in the CNMI.