

## **Lynas rare earths refinery - worst decision ever?**

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MP SPEAKS Severe birth defects, eight leukemia cases over five years in a community of 11,000, tears and anguish of the poor people from a largely shoe-making community. These are not news headlines, nor the plot of a movie.

These are the consequences of carelessly allowing the Asian Rare Earth factory to be built in Bukit Merah, Perak, in 1982. When Mitsubishi Chemical Corporation started operating its rare earth factory, the villagers complained of choking sensation, pungent smell, coughs and colds.

The community also saw a sharp rise in infant deaths, congenital disease, leukemia and lead poisoning. While US\$100 million is estimated to be the clean-up cost of the factory and dump site, the largest in the rare earth industry, it has not wiped out the memories and heartache of the villagers who lost their children and loved ones.

But 30 years later, the government has again allowed a rare earth factory to be set up, this time by Australia's Lynas Corporation in Gebeng, Kuantan. This means the government has waved the green flag with full knowledge of the possible consequences and deadly effects.

'We never learn from tragedies'

The Lynas Advanced Materials Plant (Lamp) will produce 20,000 metric tonnes of radioactive waste, which is 10 times more than that produced by the Asian Rare Earth factory in Bukit Merah.

This is typical of the Malaysian government. It operates on the "we never learn from tragedies" mode - be it landslides, haze or the setting-up of a factory that can claim lives, lead to birth defects and see severe lead poisoning. This government simply does not care.

What makes me sick is the rhetoric of the ruling leaders who have jumped on the bandwagon to parrot Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak's assurance that the factory is safe.

International Trade and Industry Minister Mustapa Mohamed said the ministry's policy would be based on laws, policies and the decision of the Atomic Energy Licensing Board (AELB).

It's about time the learned minister acknowledges that the lives of millions of people cannot be based on procedures.

Exposure to radiation, immaterial of the levels, is unsafe. Both Lynas and the AELB say the exposure to radiation would be low. This cannot be accepted as radiation levels build up according to the volume of the wastes piled up.

Both Lynas and AELB have agreed that the rare earths factory would produce thorium, a waste by-product from the plant's operations. And while they have stressed that thorium is low in radiation, the fact is that any prolonged exposure to radiation levels is hazardous.

Let us do a check list here:

- \* Why didn't Lynas set up the rare earth plant near its source of rare earths extraction in Western Australia, as it would save a huge amount of money in shipping costs?

- \* Why didn't Lynas obtain an approval from the authorities in Western Australia to set up the plant?

- \* Could the authorities in Western Australia be concerned about the possible radiation leaks, health hazards, birth defects, lead poisoning and other complications?

\* Shouldn't this in itself raise a red flag with the Malaysian authorities?

\* Is the RM700 million in foreign investment more important to the Malaysian government than the safety and lives of its citizens?

Can we, as a safety measure, re-locate residents close to the Lynas rare earth factory to a safer place? No, we cannot, because when the ore containing the rare earth is crushed to remove the thorium it releases a gas called radon.

anti lynas gathering 111211 4And radon can travel thousands of miles and like what public safety expert Dr T Jayabalan says - "you are not protected anywhere in Malaysia because the wind will blow it across the nation".

In a recent development, the Australian government reiterated that it will not accept responsibility for any waste material produced by Lynas, although one of the five conditions attached to the recent approval of its temporary operating license is that it must take full responsibility for waste management from the plant, including returning the waste to the source, if necessary.

In an official statement to Free Malaysia Today, the Western Australian Minister for Mines and Petroleum, Norman Moore, asserted that "Australia does not support the importation and storage of other countries' radioactive wastes".

But in a media briefing last week, AELB director-general Raja Abdul Aziz Raja Adnan gave his assurance that the board would insist on a letter of undertaking from Lynas Australia that it would adhere to this condition.

This, once again, proves that the government and Lynas have not been transparent in the nitty-gritty details involving the plant's operations and procedures.

On its Facebook, Lynas has said that the plant would cause zero radiation exposure and it remains committed to its core values of creating a safe environment for all.

If Lynas cannot convince the authorities in Western Australia, why should we be convinced by this public relations exercise?

In 1985, a team of eight men - a shoemaker, pensioner, crane operator, cancer patient, welder, general worker, barber and tractor driver - sued the Asian Rare Earth factory.

Thousands walked from Bukit Merah to the High Court in Ipoh. After years of struggle, the factory was shut down and decommissioned.

It is inspiring to note that a community of uneducated, poor people could take on a giant corporation and clinch victory.

In this same spirit, I pledge solidarity with all the protesters who turning up in Kuantan on Sunday to demand the shutting down of the Lynas rare earth plant.

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