

Experts to check on cyanide use in gold mine
Malaysiakini.com
March 2, 2007
Bede Hong

Over a cigar and several cups of coffee, Pahang Menteri Besar Adnan Yaakob placated Bukit Koman residents with promises that experts would be brought in soon to assess whether cyanide usage in a nearby gold mine would harm them.

Adnan met representatives of the Bukit Koman anti-cyanide committee at the Raub rest house this afternoon for an hour and promised that an independent assessment would be carried out, but did not indicate when.

The village committee, formed last year, is protesting the use of cyanide by Peninsular Gold in extracting gold from an old mining site near Raub.

The MB met committee representatives after villagers protested at the official launching of the mine this morning.

Construction of the RM60 million mine is expected to be completed within a year. The main processing plant would use the carbon-in-leach (CIL) technology to extract gold from old mining deposits, also known as tailings. The main chemical used in the process is cyanide.

Present at the meeting were Tras assemblyperson (MCA) Chan Choon Fah, Peninsular Gold non-executive director Mohamed Moiz JM Ali Moiz, Raub district officer Abdul Kadir Abu Bakar as well as several members of the committee.

Reasonable requests

A memorandum was presented to Adnan during the meeting.

It contained demands for a detailed environment impact assessment (EIA) be carried out, that Peninsular Gold lists out the safety measures taken to ensure that cyanide does not leak, and to make public its cash reserve to prove it has enough money to clean up any spills.

"I will raise this matter in the next state meeting. The committee made reasonable requests. I will call the developer (Peninsular Gold) and the committee at a later date," said Adnan.

"We are calling in experts, most likely from the academia and from abroad," he told reporters later.

Committee members said they were satisfied with the meeting and are keeping their fingers crossed.

"We are happy. We will wait for the experts that the menteri besar promised. Our disagreement is with the cyanide usage, not the mining itself," said its acting chairperson Wong Kin Hoong.

Earlier, some 200 villagers marched from a commercial lot to the mine's entrance during an official launching this morning, which Adnan officiated.

They chanted "Tak mahu racun! Tak mahu cyanide! (We don't want poison. We don't want cyanide)" as vehicles headed into the mining compound.

Present at the launch were Peninsular Gold chairperson and chief executive Andrew Kam. Also present were Tengku Hajjah Nong Fatimah and Batu Talam assemblyperson Abd Aziz Kiram.

During his speech, Adnan expressed the state government's full backing for the mine and that the mine would provide immediate job opportunities for about 200 people.

"The foreign investors who are here are assured that the construction of the mine will go ahead as planned," he said.

Economic opportunities

At a press conference later, Kam assured that Peninsular Gold took every precaution to ensure the safety of residents.

He said in 1997, an EIA report stated that it was alright to use cyanide for mining if the process is carried out properly.

Kam said the residents were aware this. However, Wong disputed this later and said that the report did not mention anything about cyanide.

Meanwhile, Kam said the mine would bring economic opportunities to the area.

"This is a democratic country. Everybody has the right to voice their opinions, but they are the minority of the majority.

"The majority are looking for jobs, for food, for development and such. You have to look at the majority. You just cannot cater for the interest of a small group," he added.

Commenting on the protest, he said: "What do the people know? Some of the people may not have been briefed properly. Some of the people don't understand. They just talk about the cyanide."

"In 2001, we won the national award for factory safety. We are very proud of our safety record. I don't believe we intend to harm the community here," he stressed.

In a related development, Wong said they have collected 6,000 signatures for their campaign protest the use of cyanide. The committee's aims to obtain 10,000 signatures before making their case to the Prime Minister's Department.

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