

Your Worst Nightmare Is Lynas!
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Lynas corporation is colluding with the Malaysian government because it anticipates making RM8 billion a year, once the rare-earths plant is operational, possibly in 2013. Money always talks.

Rare-earths comprise 17 minerals used in manufacturing mobile phones, batteries, hybrid cars and flat-screen TVs. Today, China accounts for around 30% of global rare-earth deposits but controls 97% of production. By reducing production and exports, China manages to manipulate prices of these rare-earth minerals.

Those with half a brain will wonder why the Australians did not want the rare-earths processing plant sited in Australia; and yet, our government is not bright enough to ask themselves some simple questions.

Malaysians have learned from bitter experience that local government and Putrajaya never listen.

When the Bukit Merah plant opened in the '80s, outside Ipoh, both the Japanese controlled Asian Rare Earths (ARE) company operating it, and the government, reassured local residents that nothing could possibly go wrong.

We now know they were both lying.

There have been at least eight leukaemia cases, with seven resulting in death. Those who protested in the '80s against ARE were arrested under the Internal Security Act.

A New York Times report said that ARE which was operated by Mitsubishi Chemicals is still carrying out a massive RM300 million clean-up, nearly two decades after operations had ceased.

Today, the Lynas plant is a much bigger operation than Bukit Merah. Both started under a cloud of secrecy but were exposed by concerned parties.

In the case of Lynas, there have already been several anomalies.

First. There was insufficient public consultation. An online news portal learnt that very few local residents have been consulted since the project was mooted in 2007.

Second. The first public meeting was too technical. Kuantan residents living close to the Gebeng Industrial Zone attended the initial meeting, but complained that the explanations were difficult to understand.

Third. There was no follow-up after the first meeting.

Fourth. The two MCA Aduns who returned from visiting the Lynas mine in Australia declared the Lynas project safe. Why did they think it safe? Did they present their findings to the public on their return?

Fifth. There has been no detailed Environmental Impact Assessment presented for public scrutiny. How is this possible?

Sixth. It was only after intense public opposition in Kuantan that Lynas Australia felt it necessary to send their senior management to engage with the public.

Lynas has repeatedly told us that its rare-earths ore contains trace amounts of the radioactive element thorium which they claim, is roughly 50 times less than those found in Bukit Merah.

If Nicholas Curtis, chairman of Lynas Corporation, said that the plant is safe, why did he not site the rare-earths processing plant in Australia?

He probably would not get planning approval for the plant and the permit to process the rare-earth metals in Australia, unless he spent a prohibitive amount of money in the clean-up process, to render the waste-products safe for both humans and the environment.

Moreover, it does not make economic sense to transport the rare-earths minerals thousands of miles from its source in Australia, to the processing plant in Malaysia.

Perhaps, Lynas and the Australians took advantage of the greed of our Cabinet members. These decision makers in government are tempted to make more money at the expense of the rakyat's safety.

First. Prime minister Najib Abdul Razak was presented with an award from Monash University in Melbourne, in March 2011. Najib, bristling with pride at receiving his honorary degree probably felt indebted to the Australians. When asked for approval to build the rare-earths plant, how could he possibly refuse Lynas?

Second. People claim that the building and operation of the plant will create jobs. This may be true for the construction phase, but once the plant is operational, it is believed that the highly mechanised nature of the plant, would only create a small number of jobs for skilled staff.

Is the creation of allegedly 350 long-term jobs sufficient to disregard the risks of contamination and health and safety concerns which worry the public?

Third. The rare-earths plant is being subsidized with tax payers money whilst Lynas enjoys tax-free status for 12 years. What sort of deal is this? Why should Lynas not put anything back into the community?

In a letter addressed to Fuziah Salleh, the MP who has led the charge against Lynas, Curtis said that he could have built the plant in Australia but "chose to build in Malaysia where the highest international standards for rare earths processing exist today. We chose Malaysia for its transparent and rigid regulatory environment, and we intend meeting and exceeding the high bar that your nation sets for the industry".

That is in itself a lie.

The New York Times alleges that there have been short-cuts in construction and engineers have reported shoddy work practices and use of low grade materials leading to structural defects.

Contrary to what Curtis told us, Malaysia does not have the "highest international standards for rare-earths processing". Bukit Merah was a failure. That aside, how would Curtis judge that Malaysia has the highest standards for rare-earths processing if this Gebeng plant is his first?

Perhaps Curtis has been out in the Australian desert too long. Since when has Malaysia been renowned for its transparency and rigid regulatory controls?

If this is not worrying enough, how about the Bernama report on 27 February 2012, which said that four ministries, headed by Minister in the Prime minister's department, Koh Tsu Koon, are in discussions to locate a suitable site to place waste materials from the Lynas operation.

The plant is almost ready and the permit is about to be given, but ministers are only discussing the site for waste materials now?

It could be in a field near you!

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