

AELB says met all safety requirements over Lynas
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By Clara Chooi

DENGKIL, Feb 23 — The Atomic Energy Licensing Board (AELB), now trapped in the tangle of controversies surrounding Lynas Corp's rare earths plant in Pahang, made an apparent insistence today that it has done its best to ensure the project would not expose residents to harmful levels of radiation.

During its weekly press conference at its office here, the regulator reasoned that since the RM2.5 billion project was mooted in 2008, the agency had complied with all necessary safety standards as required by law and would continue to do so.

This, director-general Raja Abdul Aziz Raja Adnan firmly pointed out, was AELB's functions as a regulatory body, adding that he refused to delve into the political aspects of the controversy.

"I have to be very consistent in what I say. Even if you change my minister, my safety standards are still the same. I would still be assuring you of your safety, I would still be monitoring your safety," he said.

Kuantan residents, along with numerous anti-Lynas groups under an umbrella coalition called "Himpunan Hijau 2.0", will stage nationwide rallies this Sunday to protest against the Lynas Advanced Material Plant (LAMP).

Despite repeated assurances from AELB and the Australian mining firm, the group, backed by opposition party leaders, has continued to insist that the plant would be a health, safety and environmental hazard and wants the project axed immediately.

Raja Abdul Aziz acknowledged the protest, the series of criticisms and even lawsuits mounted by anti-Lynas protestors but noted, "People choose to believe what they want but I have no choice... I have to believe what the facts are and this is very important."

Explaining further, he pointed out that the moment Lynas Corp issued its Letter of Intent (LOI) to build the LAMP facility in late 2008, AELB had immediately commenced its daily radiological monitoring programmes at the proposed plant location in Gebeng, Kuantan, both on- and off-site.

Under the programmes, radiation levels are monitored daily at seven reference points on location and 19 off-site — three each at a 1km, 5km, 15km and 20km radii from the plant and seven random points from the Kuantan port to the plant.

Kuantan's average radiation reading from August last year to January this year at the reference points was 0.17 μ Sv (microsievert) per hour. Malaysia's nationwide average in 2000 was 0.051 μ Sv.

According to requirements under the Atomic Energy Licensing Act, the permissible annual limit to an average person is 1 mSv, which is 0.001 Sv (1 μ Sv = 0.000001 Sv), and 20

mSv for workers in radioactive industries.

"The monitoring has gone on for some time. We have been diligently working for many, many years.

"The experience from the ARE (Asian Rare Earth) plant (in Bukit Merah, 1992), taught us many lessons," he said.

Bukit Merah was the site of Malaysia's first rare earth plant 20 years ago, which was until last year reported to be still involved in a RM300 million clean-up. The Japanese-owned Mitsubishi Chemical's ARE plant has been linked to eight cases of leukaemia, seven resulting in death.

"I am all about safety. I am all about technical and scientific knowledge. Therefore, I would welcome you to tell me that I am wrong. If I am wrong, tell me, and tell me what standards to use.

"It is no use telling me to get Lynas out without a basis and I think it is true for any other industry. Otherwise, we would be a laughing stock of the international community if we do not have these standards," Raja Abdul Aziz.

Last month, AELB agreed grant a temporary operational licence to Lynas, but provided the mining firm meets five conditions, including submitting its plans for a proposed permanent disposal facility that will manage residue generated by its factory within 10 months from the date of the licence.

Putrajaya yesterday announced that an independent monitoring unit would be formed for the construction audit of the firm's refinery, which is expected to fire up operations by the second quarter of this year.

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