

Lynas pledges to send rare earth waste abroad
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KUALA LUMPUR, March 6 — Australian miner Lynas Corp has told the Malaysian government that it will send waste from its planned rare earth refinery to a location outside the country if a suitable disposal site cannot be found locally.

Last week Lynas had maintained that waste from its refinery in Gebeng would not be hazardous, and that the radioactive residue could be recycled for “commercial applications”.

But International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Mustapa Mohamed (picture) said today that the Australian company had now submitted a letter of undertaking to send its rare earth processing residue abroad if it cannot find a suitable waste disposal site in Malaysia.

“Even though the government is satisfied there will be no radioactive residue produced during the plant’s operation, we have ordered Lynas to guarantee and plan the provision of a permanent waste disposal facility far from human population as recommended by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

“Failing which, Lynas has already expressed willingness to take the residue out of Malaysia,” Mustapa was quoted by The Star’s online edition as saying in a joint statement with Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob today.

He said an independent monitoring panel had also been set up to audit the plant’s construction.

“The fact is, the rare earth does not need to be controlled by Australia because it is not dangerous but in Malaysia, AELB is overseeing the project after considering the public’s opinion.

“This does not mean the government is bowing to the Himpunan Hijau chairman’s threats as we are doing all these for the sake of the people,” Mustapa was quoted by The Star as saying.

Himpunan Hijau 2.0 chairman Wong Tack had threatened to hold another anti-Lynas rally if the government refused to shut down the project.

Lynas had stressed previously that dregs from its refinery will not require “long-term storage”, in response to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak’s announcement last Friday that its rare earth waste disposal site will be relocated away from the Gebeng area and local communities.

“Lynas is absolutely confident that any residues from the Lynas Advanced Material Plant (LAMP) may be recycled and will have commercial applications, so will not require long term storage,” a Lynas spokesman had told The Malaysian Insider last week.

“In the event that commercial applications cannot be found for some products which will

have very low levels of radioactivity, the stringent rules, standards and conditions of the temporary operating licence (TOL) are quite clear and Lynas has every confidence it will meet those stringent standards," added the spokesman.

The Australian miner's refinery in Gebeng has caused a controversy over its lack of plans for a permanent waste disposal. Anti-Lynas lobby group Himpunan Hijau 2.0 has demanded Najib state where Lynas Corp's rare earth waste disposal site will be relocated to, claiming that it was "impossible" for a "safe" location anywhere in the country.

On February 26, Najib said the Lynas refinery was scientifically and factually safe.

Thousands of anti-Lynas protestors attended an opposition-backed mass rally organised by Himpunan Hijau two weeks ago in the single largest protest yet against the rare earth refinery that is expected to fire up operations later this year.

Critics of the Lynas refinery want the government to halt its construction and direct the Atomic Energy Licensing Board (AELB) to reverse a decision to grant Lynas a temporary operating licence (TOL), which will let it embark on a two-year trial run.

They allege that the Australian miner has not given enough assurances on how it will handle the low-level radioactive waste that will be produced at the refinery.

The government has been under pressure from groups to shut down the rare earth project over safety fears. But Putrajaya has stood its ground on the project that was first earmarked for Terengganu.

Health Minister Datuk Seri Liow Tiong Lai told the Sin Chew Daily last week that Lynas will have to send the waste back to Australia even though the Western Australian government has said it will not take back the residue from the ore mined from Mount Weld in the state.

But anti-Lynas groups have charged that Malaysia risks breaching international laws if it ships Lynas Corp's rare earth waste out of the country.

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