

Parliament to debate Bukit Merah rare earth radiation
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By Shannon Teoh

KUALA LUMPUR, March 22 — Parliament will debate an emergency motion on claims of excessive radiation at the abandoned Asian Rare Earth (ARE) plant in Bukit Merah, Ipoh and its nearby dumpsite.

Dewan Rakyat Speaker Tan Sri Pandikar Amin Mulia said the motion, filed by DAP's Batu Gajah MP Fong Po Kuan (picture) yesterday, will be debated at 4.30pm for an hour.

"The relevant ministry ... said there are studies done on the issue and reasoned it doesn't have to be debated because it is not urgent. But I don't want to compromise on public safety," he told Parliament this morning.

"I cannot decide on behalf of the ministry, who is right and who is wrong. The issue is important and arose on March 20. There is new evidence so it must be debated and discussed."

Save Malaysia Stop Lynas, a group opposed to the Australian miner's new rare earths plant being built in Kuantan, had claimed earlier this month that the radiation readings at the ARE site exceeded the one millisievert per year allowed by regulators.

Chairman Tan Bun Teet said the radiation near the plant was around 0.19 microsievert per hour while the reading near the dump site stood at about 0.2 microsievert per hour.

The Atomic Energy Licensing Board (AELB) had vouched on March 8 that the ARE site would be safe enough to be converted into a public park once the Bukit Kledang waste disposal site was completely sealed, which is expected to be done next year.

The ARE plant, which was shuttered in 1992, has been used as a cautionary tale by those opposed to Lynas' RM2.3 billion rare earth plant.

Mitsubishi Chemicals was forced to shut down the plant following public protests over radiation pollution.

Two decades on, the company is still undertaking a RM300 million cleanup as radiation is still being linked to diseases such as leukaemia, which has killed seven in the neighbourhood in the past five years.

Thousands of anti-Lynas protestors attended an opposition-backed rally by Himpunan Hijau last month in the largest protest yet against the rare earths plant that is expected to fire up later this year.

Critics of the refinery want Putrajaya to direct the nation's nuclear regulator to reverse its decision to approve Lynas' temporary operating licence (TOL), which will let the Australian

miner embark on a two-year trial run.

They allege that Lynas 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 earths project over safety fears, but Putrajaya has stood its ground on the project that was first earmarked for Terengganu.

Lynas maintains that waste from the Gebeng plant — which will be the largest rare earths refinery in the world upon completion — will not be hazardous and can be recycled for commercial applications.

Pakatan Rakyat (PR) has decided to boycott a Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) on the controversial rare earths refinery as it has no power to decide the fate of the RM2.3 billion project.

Datuk Seri Najib Razak had irked the project's detractors when he said on Saturday the panel's purpose was not to decide on the fate of the plant in Gebeng, Kuantan but was part of Putrajaya's engagement process to ensure the public understood the issues at hand.

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