

**Putrajaya claims Bukit Merah cleanup a success**  
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**By Shannon Teoh**

KUALA LUMPUR, March 22 — Putrajaya dismissed today claims of excessive radiation at the abandoned Asian Rare Earth (ARE) plant in Bukit Merah, Ipoh and its nearby dumpsite, and said readings by environmentalists this week were comparable to the background level there.

Save Malaysia Stop Lynas, a group opposed to the Lynas Cort rare earths plant being built in Kuantan, had claimed the radiation near Bukit Merah was around 0.19 microsievert per hour while the reading near the dump site stood at about 0.2 microsievert per hour.

But the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation told Parliament during an emergency debate on the matter that Perak had a background reading of 0.2 to 0.75 microsievert per hour.

"This shows we have been successful in decontaminating the area," Minister Datuk Seri Maximus Ongkili said.

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's 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 at the site that has been blamed for increased instances of leukaemia, including seven fatal cases in the neighbourhood over the past five years.

"In 1983, the Barisan Nasional (BN) government under Tun Dr Mahathir (Mohamad) allowed the plant to operate saying it was safe.

"We hope the government doesn't repeat the same mistake in Gebeng," said Batu Gajah MP Fong Po Kuan during the debate, referring to the site of the Lynas refinery.

The DAP lawmaker had filed for the emergency motion, which was approved by the Dewan Rakyat Speaker this morning.

PAS research director Dzulkefly Ahmad also said the matter cannot be reduced to mere measurements of radiation but must also clinical records, claiming a 40 per cent occurrence of lymph node disease among children in the area as well as the previously cited seven

deaths from leukaemia.

But Ongkili today said "the Health Ministry has monitored records and found there is no trend and cannot establish a direct link between the plant and occurrence of cancer."

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's 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.

Parliament earlier this week approved the formation of a Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) on the controversial rare earths refinery. Pakatan Rakyat (PR) subsequently announced a boycott of the panel, saying it has no power to decide the fate of the RM2.3 billion project.

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.

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