

Pakatan says not against RAPID but project implementation
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By Clara Chooi

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 16 — Pakatan Rakyat (PR) clarified today that it will not scrap Petronas' RM60 billion petrochemical refinery in Pengerang should it wrest federal power but will only put the project on hold, pending the resettlement of affected villages in the Johor constituency.

PR de facto leader Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim (picture) told a press conference here that the pact was not against the multibillion ringgit refinery but was concerned over how the Petronas' Refinery and Petrochemicals Development (RAPID) had been rushed without due consultation with those living in the affected areas.

"There is consensus among us in Pakatan... no confusion. I said we can impose a stop order, not against the project, but pending the settlement of other matters... you do not demolish existing villages and graveyards... you ensure the safety and environmental protection of people around," he said.

"We do not mean to say we do not support the refinery project... because an oil-producing country needs such a refinery. The issue is — we must ensure the safety of the villagers. Do not go demolishing these traditional villages."

The opposition leader added that recommendations in the Detailed Environmental Impact Assessment (DEIA) should be followed accordingly, while the livelihoods of the villagers in Pengerang should be taken into consideration.

"All these issues must be resolved... including our suggestion of an alternative site. So, why do you enforce it now?" he asked.

PAS's Kubang Kerian MP Salahuddin Ayub, who has been among those spearheading the opposition's campaign against RAPID, has suggested a nearby alternative site for the project, which he said would not affect the 10 villages now expected to be relocated elsewhere.

At a mass rally in Pengerang on September 30, Johor PKR chief Datuk Chua Jui Meng, speaking on behalf of Anwar, had pledged that PR would stop the massive petrochemical project should it wrest federal power in the coming polls.

"If we do not win this case in court, this is Anwar's message to you — when PR wins the Malaysian government, and we are sure to win... when he becomes the prime minister, he will stop this RAPID project," he thundered to the crowd of thousands at the Himpunan Hijau Pengerang Lestari rally in Kampung Sungai Rengit.

"That is our pledge to you today... and we will help you restore your lives here."

Speaking to The Malaysian Insider later, the former MCA leader said the petrochemical industry's plan for Pengerang was "not suitable" for the local villagers.

He pointed out that many constituents rely on fishing, farming and other petty trades to make a living, and would not have other means available should they be forced from their homes and away from the coast, some 15km to 20km away.

Chua noted that Pengerang was also home to a number of FELDA settlements, which are predominantly where Umno's vote bank lies.

"But these settlers do not realise that these industries will affect them in the long run too.

"The waste from here will cause acid rain and this is what will destroy their oil palms," he pointed out.

According to media reports, the state government has already invoked compulsory land acquisition under Section 8 of the Land Acquisition Act 1960 to resettle the seven villages occupying the 6,424-acre space earmarked for RAPID.

The total value of the Pengerang Integrated Petroleum Complex (PIPC) in Johor, which includes Petronas' RM60 billion RAPID, is believed to involve a whopping RM170 billion worth of investments in total, once it starts operations in 2016.

The mega project is expected to turn Pengerang into a boomtown for global petroleum investors, rivalling neighbouring Singapore as Asia's most vibrant petrochemical hub, and creating over 40,000 job opportunities for locals from construction to downstream activities.

But the government's plans have still run afoul of the local communities living in the many fishing villages girdling the southern shore of Pengerang.

Apart from fears over reports that one of the investors in RAPID-KuoKuang Petrochemical had to abandon its plan to house a petrochemical project in Taiwan following concerns that those living in close proximity to such developments would see their life span reduced, a number of the affected 3,129 villagers in Pengerang are also unhappy with the government's compensation payment.

According to previous reports, licensed fishermen have been offered RM30,000 in compensation payments for their loss of livelihood while unlicensed fishermen were offered RM15,000. Smallholders of between one and two acres of land have been offered between RM65,000 to RM105,000.

The government has also offered villagers the option of subsidised alternative housing on a 6,000 square foot piece of land with a built-up area of between 750 and 1,600 square feet, some 15 to 20km from their villages.

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