

'Follow rules, or no AP'

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REMEDIAL ACTION: While many of those affected by the poorly regulated bauxite mining industry in Kuantan, Pahang, rejoiced over the announcement of the 3-month moratorium on all bauxite activities, many more were not hopeful that all will be well once the ban is lifted. Natural Resources and Environment Minister Datuk Seri Dr Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar sat down with the New Straits Times Special Probes Team's Farrah Naz Karim and Aliza Shah to spell out the plan. He assured Kuantan folk that help was on its way and that their suffering would be a thing of the past

Question: How can you be sure that the measures that are being put in place will end the problem posed by the poorly regulated bauxite industry in Kuantan?

Answer: There are four basic areas in the bauxite industry — the mining itself, transportation, stockpiling and activities at the port. All these areas will have a different set of standard operating procedures (SOP) and mitigation elements so that contamination does not occur. Each area will have to observe their SoP. In the first week (of the moratorium taking effect), all stockpiles at the port area will need to be cleared out, by hook or by crook. If the port cannot export it all in time, it has to move it to a central stockpiling area that has already been designated. The stock will be cleared out while all mining activities will come to a standstill with no new Approved Permits (APs) issued. If the port misses the seven-day deadline (from Jan 15), as far as I am concerned, the moratorium can always be extended. The port must look like one and not a kiln for producing red bricks. I know it is not easy to clean sludge from bauxite, but they have to do it... Repaint it if they must, I don't care. Then, they need to have other mitigating measures, like washing bays and purification systems to purify water that come out from the flushing before it goes into the river. The denial syndrome must be stopped and mitigation must come in. We know as we have tested the waters and have seen the whole thing, so please don't be in denial as you are part of the problem. The centralised stockpile area will also allow for better regulating of movement of the bauxite. The 11 existing stockpiling ar-



reas will also need to be cleared out and the bauxite is needed to be sent to the central holding area within the first month. The same goes with the stockpiles at the ports. If they can't complete within the first month, we have no problems extending the moratorium until they tick all the boxes. Basically, it is simply this: the Federal Government will not issue any APs if the rules are not adhered to. There is nothing that can be done when we don't give out the AP. Nobody is going to earn money out of anything. You still have to wait for the AP to export it out. We will not compromise. So, if they cannot sell, it's not my problem.

Question: Who gets to mine bauxite after the moratorium ends?

Answer: Only a selected group of companies will be given APs to export all the current stockpile to clear it out. Remember, the mining has been stopped now and nothing will be dug. If, after three months, all the mitigation factors have not been implemented and the removal of the 11 stockpiles to the central stockpile area has not been done, then we are going to extend the moratorium. But still, we want to clear all those things that have been dug out of the earth for export so that nobody loses out. They have been dug out

Datuk Seri Dr Wan Junaidi Tuanku Jaafar says the Federal Government will not issue Approved Permits if the rules are not adhered to



anyway. We will give APs based on the port's capacity. The port capacity is only a maximum of two million tonnes a month, the clearing out is expected to go on, but we are also limiting the number of movement of the lorries. The APs will not be simply given to anybody; only to companies. At the moment, everyone can apply for APs as long as they fill out some forms. In six days, they will get the approval. This speedy process, done in the spirit of facilitating business, prevents due diligence from being carried out. Some 300 APs have been granted to individuals for bauxite mining in Kuantan. So I stopped it two weeks ago. After this, no APs will be issued if the SOPs are not observed.

Question: Are you getting cooperation from the state agencies?

Answer: We are working closely. Federal power is only on the environment and the AP. Those are the only areas that we have jurisdiction on; the other areas come under the state. In fact, the moratorium was made after a thorough assessment of the situation on the ground, and yes, the situation is worrying. The exploitation of the mineral must follow the rules so as to not affect the environment, which is under the Federal Government's purview. As minerals come under the state and state law provides for a maximum fine of RM500,000 for this, hopefully, if cases are brought to court, they will impose harsher punishment to those mining illegally.

Question: What if during the 'standstill', miners illegally add on to the existing stockpile?

Answer: That is expected but nobody is allowed to add on to their existing stockpile. We have frozen the issuance of APs to mine bauxite and cancelled the existing ones. The focus is on clearing out the existing ones. After a month, when the stockpile is cleared, nobody is going to take anything into the stockpile area anymore. The stockpile area, including the 11 that will be eventually shut down, will be watched over by police and the military. We are hoping that within three months, all the stockpiles will be cleared and all the minerals that cannot be transported out will be moved into the centralised stockpiling area. The centralised stockpile will have all the facilities like walls, drainage and cleaning bays.

Question: How do you see the Kuantan bauxite industry a few months from now?

Answer: Give it a little time... it is going to be cleaner, but the results of the mitigation efforts should be visible earlier. These proper procedures are crucial as only the existing kind of bauxite-export is feasible. Based on research, the volume of bauxite in Kuantan is not large enough to support a downstream industry and for miners to carry out processing of the ore locally, as is being done by Indonesia which banned the export in 2014. That is why exporting to China is a better option. But at the same time, we have to

reduce the environmental impact.

Question: The issue of red dust from lorries transporting bauxite is a bane among the locals.

Answer: When the lorries come out from the tenement areas, which have no washing facilities, the dirt travels with them. That they are poorly covered, compounds the problem. The rule on how the lorries and their cargo should be managed will also be in the set of SOP. No unregistered lorry can be at the stockpile area. We will come out with certificates for this and those issued them will be fully covered to ensure that there is no more spillage.

Question: What about the rehabilitation process? As it is now, former bauxite mines are left gaping.

Answer: At the moment, there is absolutely no system. Bauxite is actually surface mining. The top part should have been removed and placed somewhere so that rehabilitation can be carried out once mining is done. You are supposed to put back the top soil. Like how other countries trading bauxite are doing. There is already 1,200ha in Kuantan that had been excavated like that, both by legal and illegal miners. What we are trying to do is to bring in our Forestry Department and non-governmental organisations that are willing to assist in the rehabilitation. They have the expertise to reverse the damage. Any mining after this will have to be done the right way.