

# Kuantan facing severe danger

NST, 3/1/2016  
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**GRAVE CONCERN:** Seventeen environmental professionals went to the state capital to study the situation caused by uncontrolled bauxite mining. What they found in the air and water concurs with what we feared all along

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A TEAM of scientists has warned that the damage to the environment from the indiscriminate and poorly regulated mining of bauxite may be so severe that the ecosystem may never recover.

The adverse health effects on the Kuantan public could be devastating, and could last for generations.

The group of 17 professionals covering a diverse array of environmental disciplines have called for the Pahang government to issue an immediate stop work order on bauxite mining in the district.

This marked the first time that a group of independent scientists had arrived at a consensus and issued a dire and comprehensive warning of the consequences of the unrestrained mining of bauxite in the state.

Calling itself Responsible Citizens of Malaysia and Conscientious Professionals and Scientists, the group cautioned that Kuantan would suffer long-term health and environmental consequences if the authorities ignored the seven conditions it said must be imposed on every bauxite mine and mining operator.

It stressed that a moratorium on all the activities must be enforced with immediate effect, saying that this was vital to mitigate the damage.

Among the recommendations that came with the report on the grave situation in Kuantan was the requirement for miners to produce an Erosion Sediment Control Plan (ESCP), which must be a part of an Environmental Monitoring Plan that is closely and diligently monitored.

The miners, they said, must also come up with a rehabilitation plan once the mining ceases. It was reported that the mining of bauxite would go on at least until next year. Their comprehensive, 14-page re-

port on the unfolding disaster stemming from poorly regulated open cast mining of bauxite, which was made exclusively available to the *New Sunday Times*, also touched extensively on how transportation of the resource not only posed a serious public health threat, but is also causing irreversible environmental damage.

They reported that the export of bauxite to China had more than quadrupled, from 208,770 tonnes in 2013 to 963,000 tonnes in 2014. Last year, it hit a staggering 20 million tonnes. In January of last year, the amount of ore exported was just 343,000 tonnes. By September, the number had risen to an astounding 3.7 million tonnes. All at the expense of a suffering Kuantan public, forced to choke on the red dust.

The NST had, in early August, collected water, marine life and dust samples in Kuantan for independent laboratory analyses. The results were startling. At least two other agencies which followed up on the NST's series of reports on the problem came up with equally worrying findings.

The authorities, which were supposed to keep the problem in check, have so far not yielded any positive results.

Their only success to date is reflected in the number of summonses issued to bauxite lorry drivers, although the issuing authority admitted that these tickets were largely ignored. A large portion of the blame had been dumped on illegal miners.

The NST was made to understand that the group of scientists, whose members had stationed themselves in Kuantan for a few weeks to study the problem which had besieged the city for more than a year, was expected to forward their report to the state government soon. The report comes with a recommended action plan.

"It is our professional duty and responsibility to objectively and scientifically assess the environmental



The red sea phenomenon off Kuantan is believed to be due to bauxite ore stockpiled near Kuantan Port. Pic by Zulkepli Osman

and human conditions related to this bauxite mining issue and present our recommendations for corrective and remedial measures," the experts said.

The scientists said their discovery that ore processing outside of the mineral tenement area, including bauxite-washing that was being done close to water sources, was a cause for grave concern.

The concern, they said, was real as rivers were being barricaded and dammed up to facilitate washing of the ore to concentrate its bauxite content. They added that the stability of these structures, if compromised, could result in serious repercussions to the downstream areas when mud and sediment come gushing down.

"This very real risk is amplified during the rainy season as the volume of water increases."

This, they said, was in addition to the issue of several water intake points being downstream of many bauxite mines. They underscored the risk of heavy metals, including arsenic, mercury and aluminium, as well as other pollutants, entering the rivers during rain.

The effects on aquatic life in Pahang's rivers, including the more than 400 species of freshwater fish-

es, five species of terrapins and numerous species of invertebrates and aquatic plants, can only be guessed.

"While the present situation is dis-

turbing enough, its longer term persistence would mean that there would be no scope for the affected waterways to return to their original state. The changes would be so ex-



Road Transport Department officers checking lorries transporting bauxite ore to Kuantan Port. Pic by Farizul Hafiz Awang

