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For Environmental Justice

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Press Statement

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Government must stand firm in asking Lynas to ship out all its radioactive and hazardous wastes

Sahabat Alam Malaysia and the Consumers Association of Penang support the decision of the government to ask the Lynas Malaysia Sdn Bhd to remove and dispose of its accumulated 451,464 metric tonnes of radioactive waste.

In our view the radioactive waste should be exported by Lynas to Australia because the raw materials that are processed into rare earth originates in Australia.

We also note that the government has asked Lynas to submit a plan to dispose its neutralisation underflow residue (NUF) scheduled waste totalling 1.113 million metric tonnes, accumulated over six years.

The regulations only allow a limit of 20 tonnes of scheduled waste to be stored on site for a maximum 180 days, according to Minister of Energy, Science, technology, Environment and Climate Change, Ms. Yeo Bee Yin. Lynas has applied for exemption for their scheduled waste.

SAM and CAP are of the view that this NUF scheduled waste is also hazardous and should also be shipped out of the country by Lynas. There should be no exemption for Lynas.

In fact, our position all along has been that Lynas should not have been allowed in the first place to operate with its rare earth processing activities in Malaysia at all. We have thus consistently called for the plant to be shut down.

The government's decision is not ideal, as Lynas will still be allowed to operate if it fulfils the two conditions. There can still be dangers linked for instance to the transporting, handling, operation and possible leakages of radioactive and other hazardous materials, even if there is satisfactory waste disposal. And it is almost impossible for any safe storage or disposal of radioactive materials.

The health and safety of residents and workers in the plant and its vicinity come first. The damage to the environment, including water and soil, must also be our major concern. Income and jobs can be derived from safer activities.

The plant should therefore be closed down. The government decision to allow it to continue if it deals with the radioactive and the scheduled wastes is the very bare minimum acceptable actions and should be considered as initial steps.

We also view with alarm the report of the executive committee on Lynas operations, that found an increase in contamination of heavy metals including nickel, chromium, lead and mercury in ground water. These metals

can cause cancer and other serious ailments such as Minamata disease (from mercury). This is alarming also because 12.5% of households use the ground water for daily use, according to the report.

The dangers of radioactive waste are very serious, and the radioactivity will remain for billions of years. Thus, the accumulated radioactive waste must be shipped out of the country. The scheduled waste is also hazardous, which is why they are scheduled. There are so far no plans on how the two types of wastes are being dealt with in terms of permanent safe storage or disposal. It should be noted that the Prime Minister referred to the Bukit Merah case where 1 square km of land in Perak was lost to bury the wastes.

We also note that Lynas Corporation has threatened to take legal action against the government for setting the two conditions on waste disposal for renewal of its license to operate. We congratulate Minister Yeo for rejecting this threat. We call on the government to stand firm and not be intimidated by such threats, as the lives and health of the people and the safety of the environment should be its top most priority.

SAM and CAP therefore call on the government to demand that Lynas ship out both the radioactive and the scheduled waste from Malaysia, and that the plant stop its operations if it does not do so as soon as possible.

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President
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