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PRESS RELEASE

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C4 Center-SAM joint forum against imported plastic waste sheds light on impact

A forum jointly organised by the Center to Combat Corruption and Cronyism (C4 Center) and Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM) on improving monitoring and enforcement against illegal waste processing in Kedah and Penang has shed light on the problems faced by the communities and the enforcement agencies in addressing the issue, while creating a platform for the people and the agencies to interact.

Titled “Malaysia is Not a ‘Garbage’ Dump: Enhancing Monitoring & Enforcement Efforts in Kedah & Penang”, the event saw the presentation of C4 Center’s research findings on the governance issues and illegality linked to imported plastic waste, as well as a presentation and forum featuring a panel of experts, moderated by SAM. The event also coincides with the Meetings of the conferences of the Parties to the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm conventions on hazardous waste, chemicals and persistent organic pollutants.

“The objective of this event is to look at the root causes of the damage of the waste trade to the environment, and address serious gaps in governance issues, and how transparency and accountability should be improved,” said Cynthia Gabriel, Executive Director of C4 Center, during her opening note.

The panel was graced by Penang State Executive Councillor for Environment and Welfare YB Phee Boon Poh; Department of Environment’s (DOE) Penang Director, Sharifah Zakiah Syed Sahab; Head of DOE’s Sungai Petani branch, Ya Mohammad Nazir Syah Ismail; and Persatuan Tindakan Alam Sekitar Sungai Petani former President, Lydia Ong.

Over the course of the panel presentation, the panellists, moderated by SAM’s Honorary Secretary Mageswari Sangaralingam, discussed the different roles and powers available to each level of government in regulating plastic waste recycling, while identifying the challenges faced by authorities in monitoring and enforcement along the value chains for waste streams.

C4 Center’s research findings were presented by researcher Wong Pui Yi, with her research showing that, despite extensive coordination efforts by the government, not only were there weaknesses in the legal and policy frameworks in Malaysia, the ease of illicit activity points towards pervasive corruption and complacency among regulators and businesses, in turn leading to criminality and the intimidation of activists.

“We have to call into question the limitations and loopholes that allow for these crimes against nature committed in our country,” said Wong. “Local governments should also be more empowered and accountable.”

Malaysia saw a massive influx of imported waste following China’s waste import bans in 2018, which led to a sharp rise in illegal recycling facilities and dumpsites, resulting in land, water, and air pollution that has affected communities across the nation.

When enforcement efforts increased, the illegal operations simply moved to another region, leading to rumours of collective organisation, and allegations of malfeasance, misconduct, and corruption.

“I always believe we should solve problems at the source, and the source is that all this waste plastic is coming into Malaysia,” said Phee, adding that the issue needs to be addressed urgently. He also called for better consultation between the federal government with state and local governments in the approval of waste import permits.

“The illegal import of waste leads to environmental damage through the operation of illegal waste premises and open burning leads to the release of toxic gases, as well as toxic leachates, which pollutes river and groundwater with heavy metals,” shared Sharifah.

“On the local level, the DOE branch at Sungai Petani has insufficient staff trying to cover multiple waste sources, with enforcement made even more challenging by how wrong-doers will seek loopholes to the law. Complainants also have to be aware of the jurisdiction of each agency, and provide accurate information from reliable sources,” said Ya, adding that Covid-19 has been a detriment to enforcement efforts as well.

“Communities are severely affected from the pollution, with an increase in health issues from pollution-related illnesses and conditions,” shared Ong.

C4 Center and SAM recommend for a ban on the import of waste into Malaysia, which would serve to address the issues of imported waste being unable to be returned to origin countries, while making a big step towards resolving illegal waste processing in Malaysia by cutting off supplies.

“The problems from the international waste trade cannot be solved by the importing countries alone. Developed countries must take responsibility for their own waste, and we need to stop waste colonialism by banning the waste trade,” said Meenakshi Raman, President of SAM, in her closing remarks.

Released by:



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