



Persatuan Pengguna Pulau Pinang Consumers Association of Penang

檳城消費人協會 பினாங்கு பயனீட்டாளர் சங்கம்

Websites:
www.consumer.org.my

10 Jalan Masjid Negeri, 11600 Pulau Pinang, Malaysia
Tel: 604-8299511 Fax: 604-8298109
email: consumerofpenang@gmail.com

Letter to the Editor

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Alarming Mercury Find at Oil Palm Plantation in Penang

The Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP) is alarmed with the recent discovery of mercury in an abandoned water meter room in an oil palm plantation in Bukit Tok Alang, Tasek Gelugor, Penang. We call upon the authorities to investigate how the mercury ended up in the vicinity of the plantation as mercury pollution poses a serious threat to human health and the environment.

It was reported that students from a secondary school in Guar Perahu who had stumbled upon the mercury had taken about 300ml of the hazardous substance to their school in a plastic bag. A subsequent spill resulted in 56 students being quarantined and 16 residents of six houses in Kampung Baru hospitalised. The Fire and Rescue Department's Hazardous Materials Squad (Hazmat) then cleaned up the affected areas.

A guidance document prepared jointly by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) states the following: "The primary targets for toxicity of mercury and mercury compounds are the nervous system, the kidneys, and the cardiovascular system. It is generally accepted that developing organ systems (such as the foetal nervous system) are the most sensitive to toxic effects of mercury".

Because mercury is a global pollutant, no national government acting alone can protect its people and its environment from the harms caused by mercury pollution. Hence, the Minamata Convention on Mercury, which is a legally binding mercury-control treaty, was adopted in October 2013. This is an important step forward in the control of mercury pollution worldwide and represents a global consensus that action is needed to minimize and eliminate mercury emissions and releases.

Malaysia has been a signatory to the Minamata Convention on Mercury since 24 September 2014. The Convention contains provisions that relate to the entire life cycle of mercury, including controls and reductions across a range of products, processes and industries where mercury is used, released or emitted. It also addresses among others the export and import of mercury, its safe storage and its disposal once as waste.

A national situation analysis should be undertaken to examine our domestic situation and to produce an inventory in terms of mercury use, storage, anthropogenic emissions to air and releases to water and land of mercury and mercury compounds.

The find in the oil palm plantation raises an alarming issue that there could be illegal storage or dumping of unwanted mercury or mercury waste in the country. The responsible authorities must take stock of the situation and draw up an appropriate action plan to address the issue.

Awareness-raising and public education on the toxicity of mercury is very much needed, as can be observed in this case where the children may have thought it is a safe substance to play with. We urge the Malaysian government to publicly disclose the measures being taken to protect public health and the environment from the toxicity of mercury.

S. M. Mohamed Idris
President
Consumers Association of Penang