

# MINING FOR DISASTER

**KUALA LUMPUR:** A third of Environmental Impact Assessment conditions have been breached.

A river has been diverted and two bridges washed away.

And the silica sand mining company allegedly responsible for this is still in operation.

These were the findings of an independent study on a project in Pengerang, Johor, that also discovered the company had mined beyond the permitted zone.

The study was commissioned by Pengerang MP Datuk Azalina Othman Said this year.

While investigating complaints of environmental problems from constituents at the time, Azalina, who is the Youth and Sports Minister, found that the company had never submitted an EIA before it began work in 2002.

The company, Perniagaan Usahasama Membalak, has since been fined RM10,000 for this offence and has submitted an EIA report.

The Department of Environment approved it in April with 45 conditions.

The study found 16 conditions had not been met at the time of the field assessment last June (see sidebar).

It also noted that the Johor DOE's approval letter states that EIA approval can be withdrawn if any of the conditions are not met.

The Natural Resources and Environment Ministry, which has been closely monitoring the project since these revelations, is not satisfied with the company's level of compliance.

"We still find they (the company) have not fulfilled some of the con-

**A silica sand mining company allegedly responsible for diverting a river and the destruction of two bridges is still in operation.**

**ELIZABETH JOHN, SONIA RAMACHANDRAN and CHUAH BEE KIM report.**

ditions we have put down when the EIA was approved," says Deputy Minister Datuk S. Sothnathan.

He said he would inspect the site after Raya.

"We have told the company to comply with all conditions but if they fail to do so, we will take firm action," he told the *New Sunday Times*.

Before Azalina and the department stepped in, residents in the area complained of pollution in Sungai Gambut Kecil, which runs through the project site, and also in Sungai Punggai to the north.

They believed waste water discharged from the mining site was the source of the pollution.

Fishermen reported a low catch and fish kills while two bridges that span Sungai Gambut Kecil were washed away early this year.

The bridges connect the villages to agricultural plots on the other side of the river.

In the past week, a resident complained to the *New Straits Times* that his beach front land was still plagued by pollution and was sinking.

"There was a bit of an outcry last year but things are back to square one now. I'm worried about a repeat incident," said the resident who declined to be named.

He said politicians had visited the area and promised to look into the problem but always added that the silica sand mining would go on.

"I have nothing against the mining if it's done without damaging the environment and does not affect us," he said.

Abdullah Hamid, a fisherman from Kampung Punggai, said the problem of reduced catches were solved when DOE made the company put up bunds around the ponds that held waste water.

But he's disappointed that the company hasn't replaced the bridges.

The two bridges collapsed in January. The study found that increased flows, after part of Sungai Gambut Besar was diverted into Sungai Gambut Kecil, contributed to the destruction of the two bridges.

"We can't go to the government. The problem was caused by the company. When we ask the company, they *buat duh* (don't want to entertain us).

"They should repair the bridges for our safety," he said.

In the long term, residents could suffer flooding and erosion problems due to the river diversion, said Department of Irrigation and Drainage engineers.

Residents have also had to suffer smoke and haze from several fires in peatland surrounding the project site.

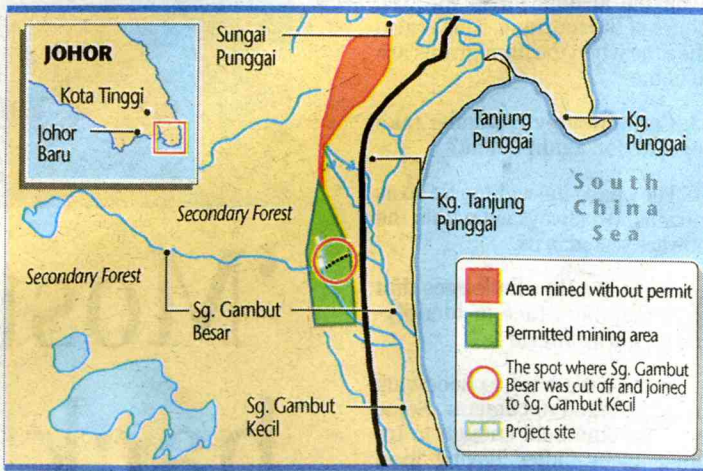
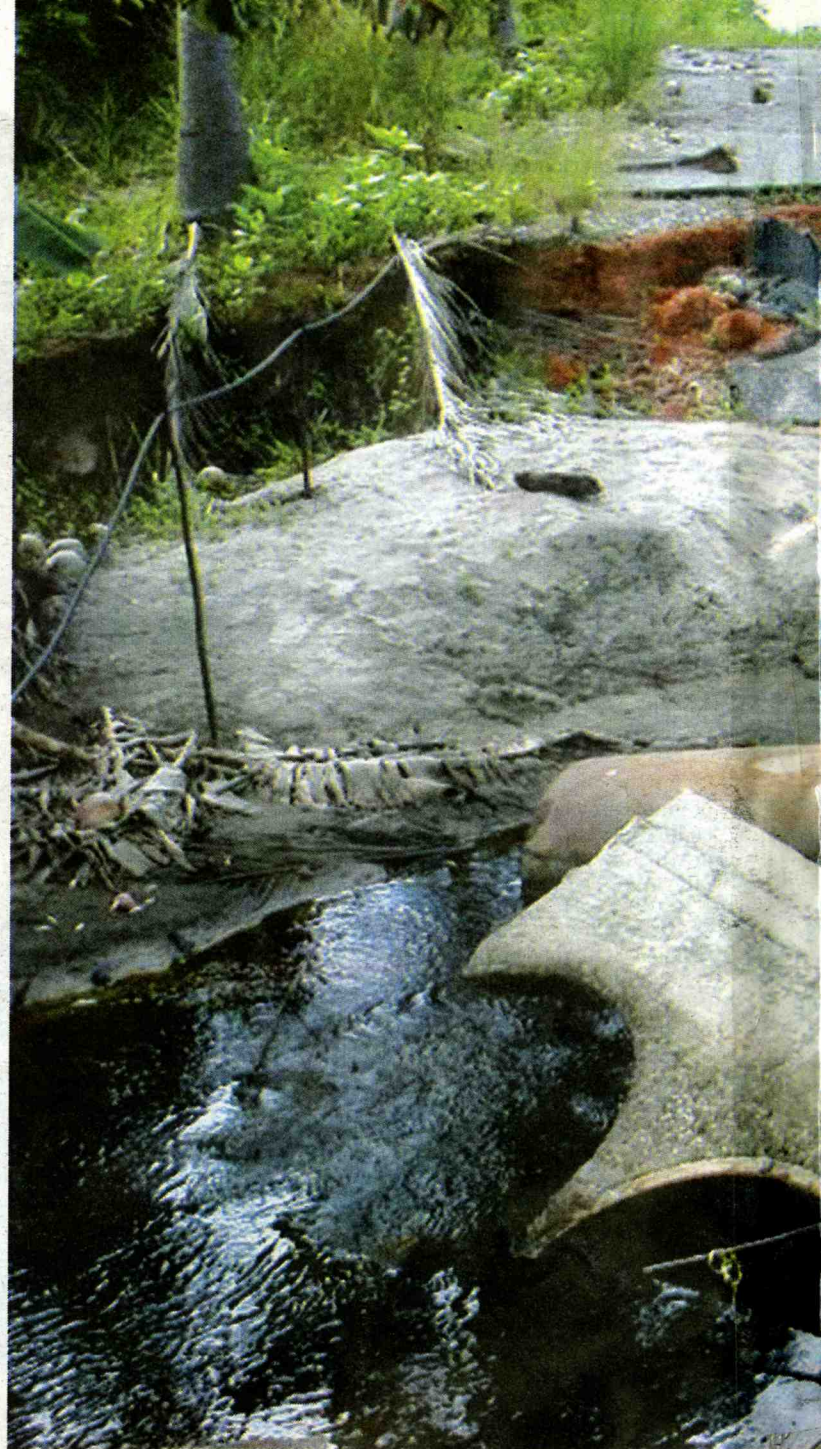
The study said these could have happened because the peat near the mining area had been drained.

Bandar Penawar fire station officer-in-charge Masnon Idris confirmed that large fires had broken out in the area in 2004 and last year.

These took several days to put out and residents of nearby Kampung Baru were even relocated for a short period in 2004.

But the cause of the fires was impossible to pin down as the area was prone to fires, he said.

Considering the nature of the project, Azalina said she could not understand how the State Land and Mines Office could have given it the green light without



**A fishing village near Kuala Sungai Punggai. Fishermen in the area had complained of pollution and low fish catch after the silica sand mining project began.**

an EIA report.

"What's more, they extracted sand for three years without an EIA. How ridiculous!" she said when contacted.

"Development is good but it cannot be illegal."

The mining company declined comment when contacted. Its human resources executive, who declined to be named, directed the *New Straits Times* to the Johor DOE and the State Land and

Mines department.

State DOE director Dr Rahman Awang said the department now checks the project site weekly and have so far found no pollution from the area.

It is also determining if work at the site contributed to the destruction of the two bridges.

Attempts to reach State Land and Mines director Datuk Mohd Naim Nasir since Monday have proved futile.