

Kuantan folk on 'red' alert

BAUXITE MINING:

Run-offs caused by heavy rain may trigger massive mud floods, landslides, warn experts

EXCLUSIVE

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HUNDREDS of thousands of people living near areas where bauxite is mined in Kuantan, Pahang, risk being victims of mud floods and landslides in the coming monsoon.

With mountains of dug and piled-up red earth sitting on what used to be flat, green land, both locals and environmentalists are fearing for the worst as they anticipate heavy rain come November.

Experts said the massive land clearing to facilitate the mining of the precious ore had widely diminished the land masses' ability to absorb excess rain water. This, and the fact that rain water would carry with it the red soil.

They said in the event the run-offs of rain water coming from the mining areas converged with other water sources, especially the nearby Sungai Balok, the impact could be catastrophic.

They cautioned that in a worst-case scenario, those in the areas could see tragic massive mudslides, which hit Cameron Highlands in the

last monsoon, happening to them.

Former Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) president Prof Dr Maketab Mohamed said bauxite mining that had been carried out in Bukit Goh and Kota SAS had seen crops and vegetation that covered the soil removed, ultimately allowing a much faster flow of rain water and little opportunity for it to be absorbed into the ground.

"This means that there will be more run-offs during heavy rainfall. Run-offs from various watersheds will then converge and cause the area to flood.

"Where there are mining sites, the wet season will bring along the dark red-dish colour run-offs," he said.

Kuantan was worst hit by floods in 2013 with 10 roads, including Lebuhraya Kuantan-Gebeng, submerged for more than a week.

The state recorded 900mm of rainfall between Dec 1 and 3, more than three times the amount of rain for the whole of December 2012.

Maketab said the run-offs would erode unstable soil and possibly cause more landslips and even landslides.

"Bauxite mines in Kuantan basically are open cast mines similar to open cast coal mines. Usually, the top soil will be removed and put aside.

"The rains will erode the uncovered active mining lands as well as abandoned mining lands, especially since the current mode of operation is that there are no requirements and

monitoring."

Maketab said mining activities in Kuantan should only be allowed provided the operators observed the standard operating procedures of mining, carry out rehabilitation and adhere to transportation rulings.

"By right, in bauxite mining, before they start mining, the top soil should be removed and put aside — the native plants are removed and cared for in nurseries. Once the mining is completed, the top soil will be used again to cover the mining areas.



Former MNS president Prof Dr Maketab Mohamed says run-offs from watersheds will converge and cause the area to flood

"Trees in the area will be replanted and it will take two years or more for the land to recover. However, none of the above are being done in Kuantan."

Other than that, Maketab said, lorries used to carry the ore should be monitored to minimise contamination.

"Lorries should not be overloaded and use only unpopulated routes," he said.

"They must be properly covered to ensure minimal

fugitive dusts, and the tyres must be washed before being allowed on the roads."

At the time the *New Straits Times* Special Probes Team was in Kuantan to collect water samples from two bauxite-contaminated water sources, it engaged enforcement personnel stationed at several points in the district to make sure those involved in the bauxite mining sector toed newly imposed regulations.

Many among them, who are locals, expressed their fear of the impending monsoon season.

"I have seen serious flooding in the district and this was when all this earth was intact.

"There are land depressions in many areas and we are very concerned," a personnel, who was wearing a mask the colour of brick, said.

During the conversation, members of the probe team were forced to cover their noses with their sleeves to avoid inhaling the trail of red dust left behind by bauxite-laden lorries.

As the officer, who had been at the station right next to a mining site for two weeks, wiped his exposed forehead, the team noticed that he was much darker than the thick layer of red dust coating his face made him out to be.

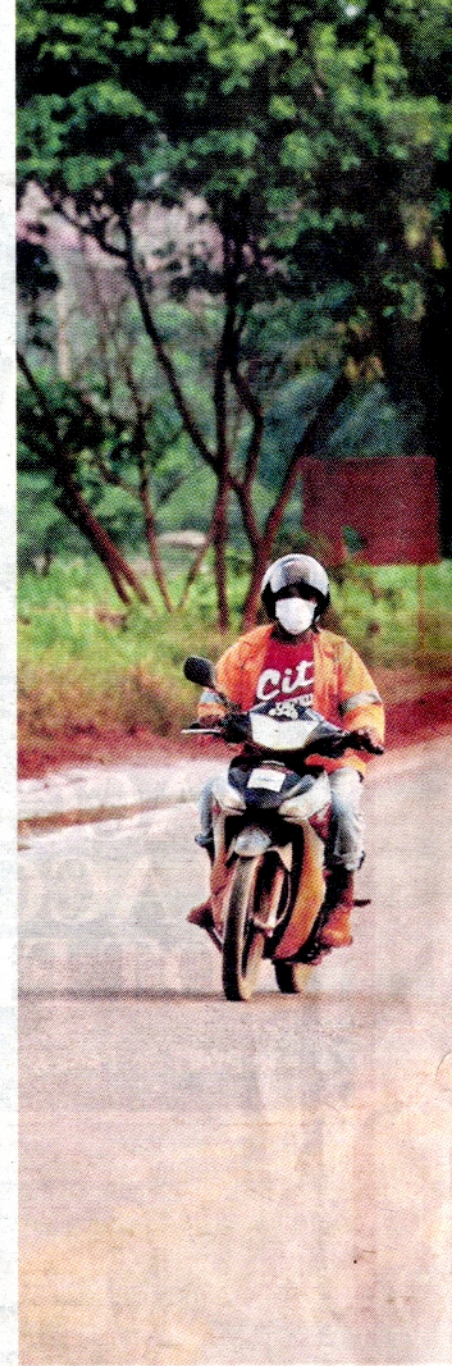
Commenting on yesterday's NST Probes Team expose on parts of Kuantan being at risk of radiation contamination, Maketab said the Pahang government should not take the report lightly, especially when it was supported by results of an independent laboratory analysis of bauxite-contaminated water samples.

"The state government had said there was nothing to be worried about but from what I know, they did not conduct any analysis on radioactive elements.

"It is difficult for us to say that the level of radiation will not affect the people as it may take time before the effects are noticeable."

He added that the state government should establish a monitoring mechanism to prevent the pollution from worsening.

"If you live in an area that is highly contaminated with radiation... you may only see the effects only when you reach 50 or 60. But we should not wait until that happens."



A trail of red dust left by a lorry laden with bauxite ore in **Jalan Kuantan-Kemaman** near the **Gebeng industrial area** in **Kuantan**. Mining operators must adhere to **transportation rules**. Pix by Luqman Hakim Zubir



PRIME NEWS ■ NEWS OF THE DAY

‘Miners need standard operating procedure’

KUANTAN: Representatives from state government agencies were absent from a dialogue session to discuss the hot-button issue of pollution caused by bauxite mining in the district yesterday.

Only three of 13 seats allocated for the federal and state government agencies and departments were filled at the session called “Impact of Bauxite Mining on Environment, Direction for Kuantan” held at a hotel in Beserah.

The three were from the Public Land Transport Commission and the state Health and Road Transport Departments.

The organiser — the offices of assemblymen in Kuantan and Indera Mahkota — confirmed that 10 others from the state and federal governments failed to send their representatives.

The absentees include the Kuantan district and land office, Pahang Land and Mines Department, Kuantan Municipal Council, and state Mineral and Geoscience Department.

Beserah assemblyman and organiser spokesman Andansura Rabu said it was disappointing that those who could provide answers to public queries on the issue had skipped the event.

“We sent invitations to them with the hope that they could come to clear the air on the problem.

“The public want to know where Kuantan is heading with regards to bauxite mining,” he said after the session here.

Andansura said the public expected answers at the forum from the authorities that dealt directly with the problem.

Meanwhile, he said, the organiser resolved yesterday that the state government should issue an immediate stop-work order to mining operators until a comprehensive standard operating procedure (SOP) was es-

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Andansura Rabu
Beserah assemblyman
and organiser spokesman

tablished.

“The SOP is vague as one agency will have its own set of processes while another body has different procedures to deal with the mining issue.”

He said the organiser planned to submit a memorandum to the state government soon to highlight the need to address the problem.

The dialogue, moderated by former Malaysian Nature Society president Prof Dr Maketab Mohamed, was attended by about 50 people, including representatives from lorry companies involved in transporting bauxite. **By Nik Imran Abdullah**