

Letters

BAUXITE MINING

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Impose conditions on licences, lease permits

FOR the past two years, Malaysia has seen a surge in demand for bauxite, requiring an extraordinary increase in its extraction and export, which has subsequently resulted in the opening of new mines and myriad mining-related activities, especially in Kuantan, Pahang. This mining boom is also accompanied by negative environmental impacts, including air and water pollution.

Environmental problems that occur in Kuantan are direct indications that while mining can be a potential source of wealth, it can also be a source of physical and social degradation unless properly managed. It is a concern that the short-term economic benefit from bauxite mining might not outweigh the long-term environmental and health costs, as well as the cost of cleaning up pollution and rehabilitating mining land.

For Pahang, the three-month ban imposed on bauxite mining allows for some improvement both in environmental quality enhancement and the manner in which mining is being managed. Mining activities should be managed in a sustain-

able way so that environmental impacts can be minimised.

There exists federal and state laws on mining that promote prudent environmental management, from the licensing process to the end of a mine operation. Since land is a state matter, the state government has powers such as to impose conditions on any mining licence or lease permit, including the requirements of mine feasibility study and rehabilitation plan.

It is also a statutory condition under the state law for the holder of a mining licence to comply with environmental standards as prescribed under the Environmental Quality Act 1974.

The act's preventive measure in the form of environmental impact assessment can provide for a proper evaluation of mining impacts on the environment and the community, and allows for public participation. In addition, the provisions on environmental management systems and environmental audit can be used to establish environmental accountability on the part of the mining operators.

The regulator should consider making the issuing of an operating



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permit conditional on the company being accredited under ISO 14001.

Consideration should also be given to land owners once their land has been stripped of all valuable minerals. Sustainable mining in the case of Kuantan means the recognition that mining is a temporary use of land, and that the

land should be returned to some beneficial use for the community after mine closure, including importing of topsoil for the purpose of rehabilitation.

Administrative arrangements of the mining industry are complex due to the division of responsibilities of federal and state agen-

cies. However, this should not be used as a hindrance towards a continuous cooperation in planning and administration, and in the enforcement of the law.

What happened in Kuantan should be a turning point for people's attitudes towards the impact of mining activities on the

environment and the way mining activities should have been managed.

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