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HALAMAN : 4

TAHUN 2004

'Newmont ignored mercury warnings'

Sari P. Setiogi
and Abdul Khalik
The Jakarta Post/Jakarta

Mining company PT Newmont Minahasa Raya ignored repeated warnings about the environmental dangers of its tailings, a marine toxic expert said on Monday.

"We conducted research in 1994 when the company had just started its exploration. Our research showed the mercury level found in fish in Buyat Bay reached 0.02 parts per billion (ppb)," said Rizald Max Rompas from Sam Ratulangie State University in Manado, North Sulawesi.

The normal mercury level in fish, according to Rizald, ranges between zero and 0.01 ppb.

Another study in 1998 — two years after the company began its operations in Minahasa, North Sulawesi — found the mercury levels in fish in Buyat Bay had increased to 0.1 ppb.

"We already warned the company and the local government about the contamination, but it is still in business," said Rizald.

"It (the mercury level) is getting higher and higher. The impact will not be seen now but in the next 10 to 20 years, as the mercury transforms into methylmercury. It could possibly become like Minamata disease if nothing is done now," the researcher warned.

However, Rizald said the symptoms exhibited by sick Buyat Bay residents pointed to arsenic contamination rather than mercury contamination.

"Arsenic is more reactive to the skin," he said.

Minamata disease is a neurological disorder caused by methylmercury poisoning, the more hazardous form of mercury.

A number of non-governmental organizations have accused PT Newmont Minahasa Raya of contaminating Buyat Bay with mercury. The company disposes of its tailings in the bay.

Laboratory tests conducted by the University of Indonesia, the Jakarta Health Agency and the National Police found that both local residents and the water of Buyat Bay contained elevated levels of mercury and arsenic, causing concern that residents were at

risk of Minamata disease.

The company has denied the allegations, saying that its tailings are free from hazardous waste.

Rizald said it was possible the mercury in Buyat Bay came from Newmont. "Most likely the company is using mercury in its gold processing. Mercury can naturally be found in the soil, but not in the water. It is possible the mercury came from debris from the hill, but it would not be easy (to contaminate the water)."

Newmont has denied using mercury in its gold processing, saying it uses cyanide.

The Submarine Tailing Disposal (STD) system employed by Newmont is another source of controversy, said Rizald. The STD system is a technique for dumping tailings into the sea through a submerged pipe.

"Back in 1994, I had an argument with the AMDAL team about this STD. They said the tailings would be safely disposed under the thermocline layer, which could be found at a depth of 60 meters in the water," he said.

AMDAL is an environmental impact analysis, which

new companies are required to complete before beginning operations. However, in many cases companies have been allowed to begin operations despite environmental warnings contained in the AMDAL.

Earlier in the day, the National Police announced they would continue their investigation into the Buyat case until they determined the source of the contamination and the parties responsible for this contamination.

National Police chief of detectives Comr. Gen. Suyitno Landung Sujono said that although the government had formed a joint team to conduct a thorough analysis of the bay, the police would continue with their own investigation.

"We don't stop an investigation just because the government forms a joint team. We have questioned several more witnesses, including experts and people from PT Newmont, to enable us to complete the case file," Suyitno said.

He said the police were now concentrating on determining the source of the contamination, before determining who was responsible for the contamination.