

## Govt slammed for not halting MSM mining operation

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Environmental activists have lambasted the government for its lack of commitment in protecting the environment as it did not immediately halt the operation of mining firm PT **Meares Soputan** Mining (MSM), which plans to dump its tailings in the sea off North Sulawesi.

Executive director of Mining Advocacy Network (JATAM) Siti Maimunah said the operation of MSM should be halted as the Office of the State Minister of the Environment had stated that the necessary environmental impact assessment (AMDAL) approval had already expired.

"Without the AMDAL, the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources should stop their operations," she said at her office on Friday.

MSM, which plans to extract gold at a 741,000-hectare mining site in North Minahasa and Bitung municipalities starting next year, faces complaints from environmental groups and North Sulawesi residents over its plan to dispose of its tailings in the sea via a mechanism called submarine tailings disposal (STD).

NGO activists and residents say toxic wastes from the firm's tailings may pollute the waters of Lembeh Strait, thereby endangering people's livelihood there.

The company responded earlier by saying that STD was the best mechanism to dispose of tailings, guaranteeing that it would not harm the biodiversity of the strait as the tailings would be deposited on the ocean bed 800 meters to 1,200 meters below the surface of the ocean and would be similar in character to the sediments on the ocean floor.

Maimunah regretted that no measures had been taken by the government to make sure that MSM would not carry out any work before it was granted a new AMDAL.

"The fact that the company's operation is not being halted, shows that government institutions don't speak the same language," she said.

Director General of Geology and Mineral Resources Simon Sembiring, whose office is in charge of monitoring mining operations across the archipelago, refused to comment further, saying that he had not received any letter from the Office of the State Minister of the Environment regarding the MSM case.

He said his office would comply with any regulation issued by the ministry in protecting the country's natural resources, but would not halt the company's work in constructing the sites because it did not mean that MSM would start dumping its tailings.

Executive director of the Indonesian Center for Environmental Law (ICEL) suggested that the general public and NGOs push the government to suspend MSM's operations by invoking Environmental Law No. 23/1997.

"There are articles in the law that allow a third party, the citizens, to demand that the government halt the operation of companies that will and are damaging the environment," he said.

He added that people should also urge the government to issue a permanent ban on the disposal of toxic waste into the sea, such as STD.

"After what happened in Buyat, there should be no more STD in the country. The government should declare that tailings cannot be disposed of in that way here," he said.

JATAM data shows that currently, only PT MSM, PT Newmont Nusa Tenggara and PT Newmont Minahasa Raya have obtained licenses to carry out STD. The latter is facing a criminal lawsuit at a North Sulawesi court for polluting Buyat Bay.