

Pollution disputes muddy the waters in N. Sulawesi

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Alleged pollution in Buyat Bay has not been settled yet, but North Sulawesi has yet again become embroiled in an environmental dispute with a mining company.

A group Rinondoran Bay residents are holding a week-long "road show" in Jakarta to protest the operation of British gold mining firm PT **Meares Soputan** Mining (MSM) on fears that it would pollute waters in the province.

"The company will dispose of their waste into the water. We're afraid it will threaten our health and our lives," said Hitsel Kasamu, one of the residents. Hitsel is the coordinator of the People's Alliance against Mining Waste.

About 10 Rinondoran Bay residents relayed their concerns to the National Commission on Human Rights, the House of Representatives, the Regional Representative Council, the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, the Office of State Minister of Environment, the Ministry of Maritime and Fisheries and the British Embassy.

They claim to have received support from 10,000 residents who oppose the planned disposal method.

Hitsel said the residents have learned from the Buyat Bay case, which implicates U.S.-owned PT Newmont Minahasa Raya.

"The Newmont case shows that submarine tailing disposal (STD) will endanger our waters. Buyat people suffered illnesses that we are not familiar with. We don't want to follow suit," Hitsel said.

Rinondoran Bay is divided between North Minahasa regency and Bitung municipality. It is located some 200 kilometers from Buyat Bay.

The Anti-Mining Network (Jatam) estimated that MSM would dump 1.2 million to 1.7 million tons of waste onto the Rinondoran seabed.

"It would pile up six million to eight million tons of waste at the end of their five-year operation," Jatam coordinator Siti Maimunah said recently.

Ros Masedung, a resident of Batu Putih village in Bitung, said that most of some 36,000 people living around the bay were fishermen, who produced 4,000 to 5,000 tons of fish per month.

"If the waste pollutes the sea, I'm sure our catch will decrease and fishermen will lose their jobs," she said.

She also warned that mining waste would harm the rich biodiversity of Lembeh Strait, which has 25 diving sites.

A diving website says that the collection of fish at the strait include Ambon scorpion fish (*Pteroidichthys amboinensis*), stonefish, sea robins, stargazers, devil fish and even the weedy scorpionfish (*Rhinopias frondosa*), as well as at least seven different species of seahorses, pegasus, ghost pipefish and the endemic Banggai cardinalfish.

State Minister of Environment Rachmat Witoelar cautiously responded to the case.

"We will carefully study the case. We'll find out whether there are alternatives for tailings disposal other than STD," he said.

At present, only PT Newmont Minahasa Raya and PT Newmont Nusa Tenggara have obtained permits to apply STD.

MSM director Peter Brown dismissed residents' fear, saying STD was the best solution his company could find to dispose of its cyanide waste.

"We have studied other options such as land tailings, but geographically it doesn't suit Rinondoran soil. Moreover, it will be more costly because we have to prepare enough land area to bury the waste," he said.

Brown said the waste would be dumped at 150 meters below the surface and would settle at 800 to 1,200 meters.

He said before the government decided anything, MSM would go on with the project.

"We have the contract that allows us to extract the site. So, in the meantime we don't see any reason why we have to stop doing what we are doing now," he said, adding that currently MSM was constructing the mining sites.

MSM is owned by British-based Archipelago Resources and Ausindo, and have invested about US\$300 million in the country. The firm controls over 741,000 hectares of mining concessions in North Minahasa and Bitung that is estimated to produce 162,000 ounces of gold every year.