

Need to Constantly Train Employees and Monitor Mines

by Ms. Tan Bee Hong

“YES, there is a Mineral Development Act 1994 that covers safety aspects in mining,” said Tuan Haji Mohd. Za’im Abdul Wahab. The Deputy Director of Operation Coordination and Implementation Division, Department Of Minerals And Geoscience Malaysia, said this covers all aspects, from exploration, mining, mineral processing and soon.

Mining companies have to submit an operational mining scheme to the department for approval before the commencement of any development work or mining within the mineral tenement area. According to the Act, the scheme includes assessment of ground stability, processing and smelting methods including hazardous materials to be used, methods for handling such material and explosives (including transportation, usage and storage), environmental protection (including pollution control and monitoring), safety procedures during development work and progressive rehabilitation and post-mine closure plans. As for underground operations, details of development work including engineering drawings, ventilation, roof support, dewatering etc. are required.

The department will check that all is in order or request for rectifications if necessary. “The State office will also do impromptu checks,” he said, adding that the department is empowered to shut down any mine that contravenes the rules. Sometimes, he said, the problem is not in the upper ranks. Professional engineers and the management are very aware of the safety aspects and know what to do such as provision of the necessary equipment and taking all measures to ensure the safety of the workers. Unfortunately, it is often the lower rung workers themselves, those directly involved in the mining work, who flaunt the rules even though the proper safety equipment is provided.

“Perhaps they feel that wearing a hard hat and boots all the time is uncomfortable and cumbersome,” explained Tuan Haji Mohd. Za’im. “It takes time to educate the people but there is a need for everyone to understand safety and be aware of the risks involved. Mines also come under the Occupational Safety & Health Act (OSHA).” The onus, he feels, is on the management to insist on their workers complying with safety rules at all times.

He said it is also unfortunate that today, the majority of ground level workers are foreign labourers. However, he



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admits, the profession is now considered a 3D job – Dirty, Difficult and Dangerous. “Few locals are interested in such jobs as these are noxious, dirty and so on. So we end up having Mongolians doing exploration, Bangladeshis and Indonesians employed in the mines and so on,” he said. In

the country at present, there are 13 tin mines, 79 iron ore mines, 16 gold mines as well as a few mines extracting manganese, bauxite and kaolin. Then there are the quarries too. Stones are imperative for development – roads, buildings etc.

Tuan Haji Mohd. Za’im feels Malaysians remember the safety aspect only after some

incident happens, but for most times, the subject is put on the back burner. He cited a recent case in Perak where a boulder came crashing down the side of a hill and killed a driller.

“The standard of safety is higher in big corporations than smaller, independent companies,” said Tuan Haji Mohd. Za’im, adding that there is a need to constantly monitor as well as to train and instill awareness.

“We conduct safety campaigns all year round though usually, it’s the same group of people who attend. Still, we have to do this continuously to impress upon the corporations that it is their responsibility to make the mines safe, not just for the workers but also for the environment or surroundings,” he said. “People who live in the vicinity of mines, especially open mines and quarries, complain about the noise, flyrocks, vibrations etc.”

He added that the permissible level for vibration in Malaysia is much lower than that of other countries in the region, including Singapore. Technical safety, he said, has to be considered right from the beginning. “We cannot over-emphasise the safety factor, even after a mine closes. For open mines that are closed, the land must be properly drained and as for underground mines, access must be closed tight to ensure nobody can enter the disused mines,” he explained.

“The department has all the expertise for world-class technical safety discipline but there is only so much it can do without the cooperation of the mining companies. There is also the matter of budget constrain. We only have 30 officers and there are a lot of mines...” ■