

# Malaysian environmentalists demand Australia stop supporting corporate polluter Lynas

Monday 29 July 2019, by [BOYLE Peter](#) (Date first published: 24 July 2019).

**Nearly 100 Malaysian environmental and civil society groups have [demanded](#) that Australia stop exerting “bullying” diplomatic pressure on Malaysia to accept half a million tonnes of toxic radioactive waste piled up at Australian corporate polluter Lynas’s rare-earth refinery in Gebeng, near the Malaysian city of Kuantan.**

Lynas has been shipping rare earth ores from Western Australia to its refinery in Malaysia since 2012. It has faced strong and sustained opposition over toxic waste that includes radioactive thorium and uranium, as well as lead, nickel, chromium, cadmium, manganese, arsenic, mercury and other chemicals.

Rare earth refineries around the world have left major and often still unresolved waste problems.

The groups held a media conference in Kuala Lumpur on July 21, to call on the Malaysian government to suspend Lynas’ waste storage licences “immediately, to prevent further generation of toxic radioactive waste and to ensure adequate disposal of its scheduled waste”.

They also called on Australian authorities to:

- withhold Lynas’ lanthanide concentrate export to Malaysia until Lynas has removed its radioactive and toxic waste — in accordance with its own undertakings in 2012 — and until it abides by Malaysia’s waste management regulations; and
- compel the Australian Securities and Investments Commission to enforce its ASX Corporate Governance Principles, which require corporations to act ethically and responsibly, by compelling Lynas to adhere to its licence conditions and undertakings, regardless of any weaknesses of law enforcement by the Malaysian government.

According to the joint [statement](#), Lynas’ current waste storage facility is inadequate; in a flood-prone area; and already contaminating the environment and nearby waterways.

“Data from Lynas’ own monitoring stations has already shown serious contamination by lead, nickel, chromium and mercury since 2015. Lynas did not test for contamination by radionuclides even though [the International Atomic Energy Agency] IAEA has stressed the importance of doing that.”

“It is inappropriately located in a low-lying peat mangrove swamp, close to fishing communities and tourist resorts. This is unsafe and is against established international standards for radiation safety and protection.”

The groups said the Malaysian government should make Lynas clean up its contamination — at its own expense — and stop any further environmental pollution. It should also hold an independent and

comprehensive health risk assessment study of the implications of Lynas' wastes, especially its toxic thorium waste, before any decision is made on its licence renewal.

Such a study should have been done before Lynas was given its construction permit, the groups added.

The statement put similar demands on the Japanese government because its loans currently underwrite Lynas. Both the Australian and Japanese governments have joined the United States in pressuring Malaysia to keep the Lynas refinery running for "strategic reasons" — in case the growing trade war between China and the US cuts Western access to China's rare earth exports.

Lynas CEO Amanda Lacaze claimed the company was now in a "very special position" as the only rare earths miner and processor of any scale outside of China, able to supply ingredients increasingly important in electric vehicles, electronics, wind turbines and in the military.

Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad made the surprise announcement that Malaysia would renew Lynas' licence and that the radioactive waste should perhaps be "spread out", while visiting Japan in late May.

Tan Bun Teet from the Save Malaysia Stop Lynas group, which has organised many protests in Australia said: "Spreading out radioactive waste will expose more people to its hazards."

He said he was appalled that a number of ministers in the Malaysian government were advocating Lynas keep its toxic waste in Malaysia, even though the cabinet had yet to agree on what to do about Lynas' license renewal.

"We are alarmed by these ministers championing Lynas' corporate profit at the expense of Malaysia's environment and public health.

"We voted for Pakatan Harapan on May 9 last year because we wanted a clean and sustainable Malaysia."

The groups were "deeply concerned" that Malaysia and Lynas are creating a "second cancer-causing radioactive toxic legacy ... at least 100 times bigger than that from Mitsubishi's Asian Rare Earth [refinery] in Bukit Merah".

The Bukit Merah rare earth refinery, in the Malaysian state of Perak, operated between 1982-1994 and had devastating consequences for local residents.

*Malaysia Today* reported: "Within a few years, the villagers began noticing physical defects in their newborns, and at least eight leukaemia cases were confirmed.

"Medical examinations on children in the area found that nearly 40% of them suffered from lymph node diseases, turbinate congestion and recurrent rhinitis. Seven of the leukaemia victims have since died."

It was finally stopped by a campaign of mass protests and legal challenges.

The Malaysian government at the time was headed by Mahathir and tried to repress the protests. At one stage 100 protesters and activists were detained without trial under the notorious *Internal Security Act*.

Decommissioning of the toxic site only began in 2003, and is still controversial, as 80,000 drums —

each containing 200 litres of radioactive waste — were buried in a dump in the jungle. It cost an estimated RM300 million and the *New York Times* called it “the largest radiation cleanup yet in the rare earth industry”.

Wong Tack, an anti-Lynas campaigner who once camped in protest outside the former Lynas corporate headquarters in Sydney is now an MP in the Malaysian government. He condemned the Australian government’s pro-Lynas diplomatic intervention in a July 23 statement: “Lynas’s massive amount of toxic radioactive waste will destroy our environment and remain a health hazard as well as a financial burden to our children until the end of time.

“Why should our children and environment pay the price for the profit and interest of foreign corporations and countries?

“The mistakes of the Bukit Merah toxic legacy may be due to ignorance and foolishness. Knowingly repeating the same mistake, however, are acts of greed and irresponsibility.

“Irresponsible leaders who cause harm to the environment and wellbeing of the people will be punished in the next election.”

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## **Peter Boyle**

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