

Malaysia reviews safety of rare earth plant

April 22 2011, By JULIA ZAPPEI , Associated Press



A Malaysian activist holds a placard during a protest held in conjunction with the Earth Day against a RM700 million (US \$230 million) rare earth plant currently being built by Australian miner Lynas Corp. Ltd. in central Pahang state, in Putrajaya, Malaysia, Friday, April 22, 2011. (AP Photo/Lai Seng Sin)

(AP) -- Malaysia said Friday it is appointing international experts to investigate whether a refinery being built by Australian miner Lynas Corp. Ltd. to process rare earth minerals presents any threat of radioactive pollution.

The plant in Malaysia's central Pahang state could become the first such facility outside China in years. Officials say it may curtail China's monopoly on the global supply of 17 [rare earths](#) essential for making

high-tech goods, including flatscreen TVs, mobile phones, [hybrid cars](#) and weapons.

But public worries have soared over risks posed by low-level radioactive waste from the site, even though Lynas insists it would have state-of-the-art pollution controls.

Malaysian Trade Minister Mustapa Mohamed said Friday that a panel of international experts will soon conduct a monthlong analysis of the project's safety.

"Let me assure you that the safety of the people has the highest priority," Mustapa told a news conference. "We will never compromise the public interest in the handling of the Lynas issue, and the health and safety of our people and the environment will continue to receive the highest priority."

The plant will not receive government approval to operate or import any raw material into Malaysia until the panel completes its assessment, Mustapa said.

Malaysia's last rare earth refinery in northern Perak state was closed in 1992 following protests and claims that it caused birth defects and leukemia among residents nearby. It is one of Asia's largest radioactive waste cleanup sites.

Raja Abdul Aziz Raja Adnan, the director general of Malaysia's Atomic Energy Licensing Board, said the review panel would likely comprise five to seven experts recognized by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

A Lynas representative said the company planned to issue a statement later Friday.

The Pahang plant is meant to refine slightly radioactive ore from the Mount Weld mine in Western Australia, which will be trucked to Fremantle and transported to Malaysia by container ship. Lynas previously said the refinery is expected to be operational late this year and could meet nearly a third of world demand for rare earths, excluding China.

China has about 30 percent of rare earths deposits but accounts for 97 percent of production. The United States and Canada also have rare earths but stopped mining them in the 1990s as cheaper Chinese supplies became available.

Foreign manufacturers were alarmed when Beijing temporarily blocked rare earths shipments to Japan last year after a Chinese fishing boat captain was detained near disputed islands.

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