



PT. NEWMONT MINAHASA RAYA

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Facts About Mercury

When people think of mercury they usually recall its metallic form – the mercury in thermometers that is capable of rolling in shiny little pools over a hard surface. This elemental mercury is one of three toxic forms of the element, the other two being methylmercury and mercury vapor.

But mercury exists in nontoxic states as well. One of these is mercuric sulfide, the most common form of mercury present in the environment. This is the form of mercury found in a mineral called cinnabar, which is commonly encountered in gold deposits but does not dissolve in water. Cinnabar-derived mercury sulfide is therefore referred to as a stable or non-threatening form of mercury.

As part of its ore processing, PT NMR placed tailings onto the floor of Buyat Bay which contain small amounts of mercury in cinnabar. Although some gold miners use poisonous metallic mercury to extract gold from ore, PT NMR never practiced this method at Minahasa.

In 2004, a nongovernmental organization claimed that mine tailings discharged by PT NMR had made Buyat Bay villagers sick with a mercury-based illness called Minamata disease. This is not true, a conclusion which has been verified by several reputable and independent research organizations.

Minamata disease is a degenerative condition of the brain and peripheral nervous system. It is caused by a form of mercury called methylmercury. Methylmercury can accumulate in fish and enter the human food chain when people eat fish. But this dangerous form of mercury is produced by a process called methylation, which occurs only under specific biological and chemical conditions not present in Buyat Bay waters.

In the summer and fall of 2004 the National Institute for Minamata Disease in Japan studied Buyat Bay water and marine life for evidence of methylmercury. It concluded that neither the toxin nor symptoms of Minamata disease could be found. These findings were endorsed in a report issued by the World Health Organization, a special agency of the United Nations.

Studies conducted by PT NMR, the Development Empowerment Board of North Sulawesi and the Department of Environment and the Australian Government Research Organization arrived at similar conclusions. In addition, Sam Ratulangi University has conducted a health survey of the Buyat Bay community which concludes that skin discolorations and lumps found in residents reflect the symptoms typical of bad sanitation in poor coastal communities.

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