

Tests show normal levels of heavy metals in villagers close to Newmont mine

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JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) - Indonesian government health tests show heavy metal traces in villagers living close to a U.S.-owned gold mine in Indonesia are within normal levels, but higher than those living far from the facility.

Denver-based Newmont Mining Corp claimed the survey proved that it did not cause the health problems suffered by residents close to the mine on Indonesia's Sulawesi Island and said it hoped it would help in its legal battles.

The study is the latest to produce conflicting results regarding alleged pollution from the mine, which is at the center of a bitter dispute between its owners, Newmont and the Indonesian government.

The company's local unit, PT Newmont Minahasa Raya, is being sued by the government for the equivalent of US\$133.6 million (euro103 million) for allegedly polluting the bay.

Prosecutors are also planning to file criminal charges against six company employees -- an American, an Australian and three Indonesians -- stemming from the alleged pollution, which reportedly caused residents to develop skin diseases and tumors.

A health ministry audit of 156 villagers living close to the bay showed that levels of arsenic, mercury and antimony were within "tolerable levels", according to a summary of the survey faxed to The Associated Press Wednesday.

The levels were slightly higher than villagers that were outside the mine area and tested as a control, the survey found. The survey, which did not attempt to prove whether there was a link between the alleged pollution and villagers health, did not explain the discrepancy.

"The pollution allegations not only hurt local people, they saw six Newmont workers put in jail," Newmont said in a statement. "We hope this report helps clear their names and stops the suffering for them and their families."

Indonesian environmental group Wahli claimed the sample was too small to produce meaningful results.

A string of earlier tests on the bay and its residents have produced conflicting results.

Newmont has admitted it had released 17 tons of waste mercury into the air and 16 tons into the water over five years, though it said the toxic releases were far below Indonesian emissions standards.

Newmont stopped mining at the Sulawesi site two years ago, but processed ore there until Aug. 31.

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