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Mining and Mineral Industry

By: Ir. Hj. Look Keman bin Sahari

Malaysia was, for many years, the world's largest producer and exporter of tin. The city of Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Kampar, Rawang and many other towns owed their existence to tin mining. During that time, Malaysia was not yet an industrial nation as it is now. Now, we have many mining and mineral dependant industries, particularly automotive, shipping, computers and other electronic-based industries. Unfortunately we have to import all the minerals that feed these industries from overseas. We have to buy coal from Indonesia, iron from Brazil, aluminium, gold, diamond and copper from Africa. What happened to our illustrious mining industry? Do we not have any other minerals to mine other than tin?

In our golden era of mining, we were actually scraping the surface of the earth for tin. We do not need to spend so much money for exploration work. We do not look for the advance technology to explore for metals or minerals. We do not need to apply for thousands of acres to explore for minerals. Tin mining was our world. That day is already over.

The deepest mine in the world is over six km deep. Our deepest mine was Sungai Lembing Tin Mine. It was only a few hundreds metres deep. There was hardly any exploration work to look for minerals hundreds or even thousands of metres below ground. In fact even now we do not know what we have down there. The investment climate for mining in Malaysia is not very favourable for large scale mining especially underground. Underground mining requires large capital outlay. No foreign company will want to invest in mining industry unless they can be sure that they can get back their money with reasonable profit. The lag time between exploration work and actual mining can be quite long, between 10 to 15 years. We do not expect the industry to recover so soon even if the favourable condition is achieved. But then do we have a choice; or are we happy to import all the minerals for our industrial use forever? If we can do it with petroleum and gas industry why can't we do it with mineral industry?

Malaysian government and the industry no longer send students to study mining engineering and related technology overseas. Whoever left is already in the senior position in the government or in other related industry. The new graduates from the local universities are joining the quarrying, petroleum, explosives and even construction industry. Their presence in these industry prove that the knowledge they gained from the universities is also very useful in other industries. If the authority actually requires the mining and quarry industry to employ engineers in this industry, more of them will be needed. As it is now many employers in the quarry industry for example would prefer non-engineers to work for them to cut cost. However this is a false saving since they need to be trained from scratch. Actually with current emphasis on health and safety, environment and with the continuous advancement in technology, we need more of them. The expertise that they need must also be tailored for the future need of the industry and they need to prove to the industry that you need us as much as we need you. Apart from the technical expertise, the attitude of the new breed of engineers must also be improved. They must be willing to learn while they are in the job and help to improve the industry to a new height. Learning is a life long process and it is with a purpose to help Malaysia achieve the industrial status but with our own mining industry to support it. This is also consistent with the BEM Continuous Professional Development Policy. In the spirit of MALAYSIA BOLEH, Malaysia can do it. ■

Note: The writer is a Committee Member of the IEM Standing Committee on Publication, a Member of the IEM Training Board and also IEM Oil, Gas and Mining Technical Division.