JURUTERA

Number 3, March 2010 IEM Registered on 1 May 1959

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Mining in Malaysia Now

by ***Ir. Haji Look Keman bin Sahari***
Oil, Gas and Mining Technical Division

THE heyday when mining was a major contributor to our economy is over, at least for the time being. This does not mean that Malaysia does not have the raw materials to support our industry. So far, we have barely scratched the surface of the earth. We had only one underground mine that was closed more than 25 years ago. The Mamut Copper Mine, the deepest surface mine, was closed just over 10 years ago. Since then, we have not found any new mineral deposit of significant size to permit mining. We have not been encouraged to explore for minerals in remote areas for fear of environmental degradation and whatever minerals that we had found so far, we have not started mining for similar reasons. We need all the minerals we have to feed our industry otherwise we have to import them as we do now. We buy coal from Indonesia, tin from Brazil, iron ore from Australia, gold and diamond from South Africa and countless other minerals from all over the world. The deepest mine in the world is only 5km underground. Under the city of Sydney is a vast coal deposit that is being mined. What do we have under the city of Kuala Lumpur? The mining technology for us to mine our minerals in a friendlier manner already exists. The question is are we ready for it?

The mining industry has not sponsored students to study mining engineering and related technology for a long time now. How can we improve our mining conditions if there are not enough qualified people to fill such posts in the industry? Local universities have not introduced any mining and mineral engineering courses as required by the industry. The only university to offer such a course was Institute Technology Mara more than 30 years ago at the Diploma level. Can we come up with an updated and improved syllabus for the industry? Most remaining mining engineers are already retired, those who are still active are in the quarrying and construction industry with a few in the mining industry.

The only active institution that is still involved in research work in mining related technology is Jabatan Mineral & Geosains. However, the department has not published any findings to the public for reference or even submit development applications yet. They should hold seminars or conferences so that the industry can learn from them. We need to continue to do R&D for future development of the industry and assist the industry until it is ready to shine again. In the meantime, mining engineers suddenly find that their expertise is needed in the construction industry as blasting and tunnelling engineers. But there are just not enough of them. Yet I am an optimist. ■