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Japanese Multinational Corporations and the Export of Pollution

The Case of Bukit Merah¹

by

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Abstract

This article presents a study of the Bukit Merah pollution case in Malaysia in which a joint venture, Asian Rare Earth, involving a Japanese multinational corporation located in Bukit Merah was accused of dumping radioactive waste and jeopardizing the health of local residents. The article identifies the 'push factors' that compelled Japanese companies to relocate the environmentally unfriendly factories to developing countries and discusses the 'pull factors' that have contributed to Malaysia's becoming a destination for 'dirty industries'. In the light of these discussions, the article gives an account of the Bukit Merah pollution case, the first widely publicized case of the export of dirty industries in Malaysia. The article will show that the process by which the case of Bukit Merah unfolded has close parallels with the famous case of mercury poisoning in Minamata Bay in Japan. However, unlike in similar cases in Japan, there has yet to be a resolution to the Bukit Merah example. The article posits that there still needs to be a structural change in the relationship between the state and civil society in Malaysia for resolution to move forward.