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'Health Ministry must first verify Ayer Ganda water is safe'

PETALING JAYA: The Ayer Ganda water treatment plant has traces of arsenic at more than 0.02 milligram per litre, 0.01 milligram per litre higher than the permissible level set by the Health Ministry, says the National Water Services Commission (SPAN).

The ministry's National Drinking Water Standards set an arsenic maximum contaminant level at 0.01mg/L but a recent report by the Perak Water Board (LAP) recorded an arsenic level of 0.027mg/L at the water treatment in Gerik.

Another report by the Health Ministry recorded an arsenic level of 0.024mg/L at the same plant, which was ordered to be shut down

indefinitely by SPAN on April 9.

SPAN chairman Charles Santiago said there had since been objections from certain quarters that wanted the plant to remain open, saying that the contamination level was safe.

"All we want to say is it's not true and we can only take the word of the Health Ministry as the basis of our decisions. Nothing else.

"There are people - for reasons only known to them - who wanted the plant to remain open. But we are guided by the Water Services Industry Act and what the Health Ministry tells us," said Santiago, when contacted yesterday.

He said unless there was a letter

by the Health Ministry verifying that the water was safe to be consumed and that there was no more arsenic poisoning, the plant would remain closed.

"People are complaining of skin problems and to open the plant and allow for the water to be consumed would be irresponsible. This decision was made to protect the people's interests. This involves the people's health and there shouldn't be a compromise," he said.

The Health Ministry, said Santiago, was also probing complaints by residents suffering from skin problems, which were among the possible results of long-term exposure to arsenic.

According to the Health Ministry, arsenic is categorised under the group G1 carcinogen by the International Agency for Research on Cancer.

Arsenic ingestion, which can occur through long-term exposure to the substance or ingesting water that has been poisoned with arsenic, can result in skin wounds, hyperkeratosis and chronic diseases such as cancer of the skin, kidney, bladder and lung.

Separately, according to SPAN in a statement, it had no plans to reoperate the Ayer Ganda water treatment plant, which had a capacity of 0.68 million litres per day and used to supply water to about 312 user

accounts in Kampung Ayer Ganda.

Since the shutdown, LAP has been supplying water to residents in affected areas using nine tank lorries and 13 static water tanks placed at strategic locations.

"SPAN will request LAP to increase the number of tank lorries and static tanks to alleviate the residents' burden as they were affected by water disruption.

"As a long-term measure, LAP has also started installing pipes from the Lawin water treatment plant to supply water to Kampung Ayer Ganda.

"Works to install this 11.5km pipe line are expected to be done by the middle of June this year," said SPAN.