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KUALA LUMPUR, May 5 — Environmentalists and alternative energy producers have criticised the approval for Malaysia's first nuclear power plant, saying it was rushed through without adequate public consultation given the risks of radioactivity.

Centre for Environment, Technology And Development Malaysia (Cetdem) chairman Gurmit Singh said a nuclear power plant was a risky undertaking and slammed the lack of public consultation.

Energy, Green Technology and Water Minister Peter Chin announced yesterday that Malaysia has approved a proposal to set up a nuclear power plant, which will start operating in 2021.

“Why is there no public consultation?” Gurmit asked when contacted by The Malaysian Insider. “I had previously asked for the nuclear energy policy to be made public. Why so secretive?”

Gurmit, who is unconvinced that Malaysia needs nuclear energy, pointed out that nuclear power plants generate radioactive waste that needs to be disposed of and, according to him, only 2 countries — France and Britain — can currently process nuclear waste.

“I don’t think the government has addressed the [existing] energy efficiency [issues],” he said. “Nuclear power is capital intensive and exposes us to a lot of risk.”

He added that advanced countries such as Denmark survived without nuclear power while Germany had considered shutting down its nuclear power plants at one point. Finland, he said, was also experiencing issues with its nuclear power programme.

“There is a lot of energy wastage in this country because energy prices are so low,” he said. “Make people pay market prices and then push for energy efficiency and then look at renewable sources. You have to be very careful when dealing with nuclear power.”

One solar power industry player contacted by The Malaysian Insider said that while nuclear power has proven benefits, it could also be dangerous especially given the expertise and maintenance culture in Malaysia.

“What if something goes wrong?” asked the industry player who declined to be identified. “If something goes wrong with solar, you just replace the solar panel but you can’t do that for nuclear power plants. We lack the building maintenance culture — you know, we have first-world infrastructure but third-world mentality. I am worried about bringing nuclear power to Malaysian shores.”

Tenaga Nasional Bhd declined to comment for this article and The Malaysian Nature Society said they needed more time to study the matter.

Nuclear power currently accounts for about 15 per cent of the world's electricity output. About 30 countries currently operate nuclear power plants, with France, Japan, the US and South Korea among the biggest producers.

Though nuclear power plant accidents are relatively rare, the consequences can be devastating.

The Chernobyl disaster in 1986 injected an estimated 30 to 40 times the amount of radioactive material into the atmosphere as was released by the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The disaster occurred as a result of a meltdown at the plant and caused 31 immediate deaths and forced thousands of Ukrainians and Russians to flee their homes and cities. It also caused health problems to affected residents and contaminated the surrounding farmland.

Chin said yesterday that Malaysia needed nuclear power to meet the country's increasing demand for energy due to industrialisation and to ensure energy security.

He also said that the final approval rests with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Chin also said the country required 20 per cent in power reserves and the current power usage in the country was 14,000MW out of a capacity of 23,000MW.

"We have to look at energy security. No country can grow without energy, no gross domestic product can progress without energy," said Chin.

He, however, did not provide explicit details in his announcement except to say Malaysia will comply with the IAEA regulations on the nuclear power plant.