

Coal power at Norochcholai - some clarifications

This has reference to the letter of G. A. D. Sirimal on the above subject (*Daily News*, 22.01.2004) which in turn had been written in response to the article by the Bishop of Chilaw in the *Daily News* of 01.01.2004. As a former Cooperative Fisheries Development Officer well acquainted with Kalpitiya area and one time Special Commissioner of Chilaw, I have been following the debate concerning the proposed coal power plant at Norochcholai. I have also written to newspapers on this subject. I wish to take up the points raised by Mr. Sirimal in his letter.

(1) He refers to a statement made by the Bishop three years ago to the effect that, if the government builds the plant at Norochcholai that would be on the government's own responsibility. In the context of that time when so many experts and the Bishop were giving cogent reasons against the Project, the words referred to above, far from being a slow of approval, are really a challenge. It was like saying "O.K. Go ahead and build and see what happens we told you so." Right from the start to this date the Bishop has been consistently opposing this Project. Any "misunderstanding" was wishful thinking.

(2) Mr. Sirimal seems to take for granted that Ms. Rambol of Denmark gave a carte blanche to proceed with Norochcholai. That is not so. For the protagonists of Norochcholai Project, the foundation of the scheme had been the 4.2 km. jetty for transporting coal. Rambol demolished that.

"The above mentioned jetties, specially the long ocean jetty, present a range of problems in terms of safety concerns, high visual impact, nuisance to the fishermen as well as high construction costs." (Page 9 of The Report)

In its place Rambol suggested a transshipment barge set up. But there too Rambol played safe and added some significant clauses. Being conscious of safety concerns, Rambol stated, "In the case both with jetty and barge solution, the unloading vessels will need special protection from the navy, in case of high alert situations." (Page 11) So much for "low electricity generation costs" at Norochcholai. Also so much for the guarantees given to fishermen to do their job - messing around with navy ships and getting caught in a security zone!

The Danish experts were also careful to insert a safety clause for themselves. They said "The Project review is carried out based on the assumption that the environmental regulations as well as all other laws of the country will be observed and followed by the operators of the facility, as it is the case in any other country." (Page 19) How well laws - environmental or otherwise - are observed in our country we know only too well!

To cap it all, Rambol states that further analysis of the barge transfer boat harbour solution is called for. (Page 31). How different all this sounds from the question posed by Mr. Sirimal. He says, "When a consultant is appointed with mutual

consent - the government and the Bishop of Chilaw - is it mandatory for both parties to accept and abide by their findings?" It is certainly mandatory to use our common sense and take note of the reservations (some of them indicated above) of the consultants.

It is also worth recalling that subsequent to the publication of the Rambol Report, a number of our local experts, including those who had actually done on-the-spot studies pointed out serious drawbacks in the transshipment - barge proposal. Evidently the relevant Authorities took note of all that.

(3) In letter after letter, written to daily papers, Mr. Sirimal keeps repeating that the Bishop of Chilaw had elicited a promise from the political leaders - the President and the Prime Minister - to abandon the Project. It can of course be conceded that, when a respected religious leader who had shown great sensitivity to the needs of the people, takes a public stand on some subject, that action would have some impact on the leaders of a country.

In fact, the President in a propaganda publication, while recalling the favours done to Catholics (appointment of C. V. Gooneratne. Committee, appointment of an Additional Secretary of Christian Affairs, appointment of some teachers of Christianity, providing for training of Christianity teachers at Bingiriya School of Education etc.) also mentions the plea of Catholics and the Bishop of Chilaw and the scrapping of Norochcholai. All this is straight forward

and there is nothing underhand or secretive about it. Mr. Sirimal insinuates much more than this. If he has any proof, he should produce it. Otherwise he should stop repeating this story.

(4) I agree with Mr. Sirimal when he says, "The whole world knows that security cannot be absolutely sure as seen in the case of attacks on twin towers and Pentagon in USA, and our own hallowed shrine Dalada Maligawa." Why not do our best to minimise chances of attack? After all the USA is going in a big way after suspects. Dalada Maligawa is now very rightly made secure. The horrible attack on it could probably have been averted if security had been tighter - instead of sitting back and saying that "Security cannot be absolutely sure". It is ironic that the Danes are speaking of navy ships protecting Norochcholai while Mr. Sirimal is underplaying the need for security.

Let us make a final observation, Mr. Sirimal, making all kinds of unproved allegations and invariably writing in a combative tone, speaks of "unreasonable and anti-national stand of the Bishop and the Church." On the other hand the Bishop, after calmly and clinically stating the reasons mitigating against the Project, matter-of-factly states, "As dutiful citizens we had to speak out even at the risk of being misunderstood." These are two mental attitudes. I suppose there is goodwill on the part of everyone concerned.

- Peter Lowe