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Chilaw Bishop awaits govt.'s decision on Norochcholai to spell his stand

by Himangi Jayasundere

The Bishop of Chilaw, Frank Marcus Fernando who has been in the forefront of the opposition against the Norochcholai coal

power project, yesterday said that he would await the decision of the government on the proposed project before making known his latest position.

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The government's policy on the issue was still unclear by yesterday. On Sunday the Prime Minister in a statement on state television indicated that the coal fired power project would be shelved but in parliament on Monday, Minister of Power and Energy, Karu Jayasuriya expressed continued commitment to coal fired power generation. He said that the site for the project would be Trincomalee, Norochcholai or Hambantota.

However engineers last week strongly criticised the government's indecision and pointed out that around Rs.500m have already been spent on feasibility studies in Norochcholai. They also said that coal power projects will have to be set up in all three sites to meet the future electricity demands of the country.

The project was earlier shelved mainly due to opposition from the Bishop of Chilaw, despite the fact that feasibility studies were conducted at a cost of Rs. 500m under a Japanese loan.

On the Bishops continued opposi-

tion and a request for a second opinion mainly based on environmental concerns, the government brought down independent experts from Denmark who were acceptable to the Bishop in August 2001.

According to a CEB source the money to pay for the second group of consultants came from a loan from a foreign country believed to be Norway. "The Treasury did not have that kind of money to pay" the source said adding that the government had to make great efforts to obtain the funds.

The experts from Denmark in their conclusions indicated that it was favourable to continue with the project and claimed that best international practices has been adhered to. On September 30, 2001, while the eight hour power cuts were in place the Bishop in public a statement said that "It is up to the government to proceed from here".

However on November 4 in the wake of elections in another public statement demanded "officially can-

cel the Norochcholai project in an irreversible manner".

On December 23, 2001 after the results of the election were declared and the new government was in place, he once again said "The United National Party had recently come to power with the blessings of the voters in the Western and North Western coastal belt would surely not indulge in a breach of faith by reviving this project".

According to energy experts the project which was initially to take off around 1996 would have been completed by 2004. However the delay has heightened the current power crisis and added to problems which are likely in the future. At present consumers are burdened with five hour power cuts and an increase in electricity tariffs.

At a press conference by the Institution of Engineers last week a member pointed out that "a Bishop or any other religious dignitary should not be allowed to hold the entire country to ransom".