

Norochcholai: Power plant atop a volcano

I write with reference to the letter of . Godfrey R. Swans (Daily Mirror: December 15, 2005), and (reply to it by Mr. G.A.D.Sirimal (Daily Mirror: December 27, 2005).

Mr. Swans has raised the very pertinent question of security of the intended power plant and of coal carriers in Kalpitiya peninsula, which is a stone's throw from the Jaffna-Mannar axis. It is worth mentioning here that the question of security has been raised over and over again by very responsible persons, who had no vested interest whatsoever. Let me mention a few:

The late Engineer Carlo Fernando, who knew the area well and was all out for coal, was totally against this particular site due to security and transport problems.

The Rambol Report states: "The bulk carrier will be an easy target for terrorists as it cannot be guarded/protected from the shore 4.5 km away. Therefore a navy vessel might have to guard the carrier during anchorage" (Page 28). The Bishop of Chilaw, who has a panel of advisors including Engineers, has mentioned security more than once.

Mr. Sirimal states "Vulnerability exists in all parts of the country. Even your safe homes are bound to be attacked by robbers, and murderers." Is that the importance that M Sirimal attaches to this enormous undertaking to produce the much-needed power for the country, and involves such a colossal sum of money, which the taxpayer has to pay with interest? Why not choose Jaffna itself to put up the power plant?

Mr. Sirimal says, in effect, that Kalpitiya, so close to Mannar, is quite a safe place to build the power plant. Poor Mr. Sirimal!

The irony of it was that the ink had hardly dried on his letter when vicious attacks were made on navy boats near Mannar (on 22.12.2005). One boat was destroyed and three navy person-

nel killed. There had been other attacks too in that area. If armoured navy boats and trained navy personnel were no match to the attackers, what chance have the large coal carriers and barges plying in that area? When the question of security is raised, the stock answer on the part of promoters of Norochcholai is "Ordinary citizens have no right to question security. It is up to the Government and security forces to take care of that". It would appear that we, the poor citizens have now to look after the armed forces as well, with our two cents' worth of common sense!

In his letter, Mr. Sirimal asks, "Will any man ever think of objecting to establishing a coal plant, or any other national project, if he is not prepared to face any security threat, if at all such a situation arises?"

I am afraid we cannot agree with this reasoning. Should we blindly court disaster? Should we act like ostriches? The issues involved - the power problem, six hundred million dollar debt with interest etc. - are too big to blindly risk building the plant and preparing costly infrastructure

Like harbour, boats etc in Kalpitiya. This is an avoidable risk. There

are safer and suitable sites in the south of the country. Only fools rush in where angels dread to tread.

Mr. Sirimal also asks whether Mr. Swans "has no faith in the peace negotiations actively pursued by the Government". We had faith, if you don't mind, in peace negotiations already held, and the Ceasefire agreement. Look what has happened now! Scores of army personnel wiped out within a couple of weeks; navy boats attacked and sunk. This story has gone on for nearly 25 years.

Even if a peace Agreement is reached, there is nothing to prevent attacks coming up again and again. Putting up a power plant in Kalpitiya area is like sitting an important project on the top of a not-so-dormant volcano. It is foolish and criminal. When the crunch comes, the advocates of the project would be out of the scene.

Not long ago, a high official in the CEB, when asked whether Norochcholai was the best site for a coal power plant, replied saying that, considering the urgency we are now placed in, it is the best site. The inference is that Norochcholai is not a good site - but it has become a good site because of the ur-

gency. Who created the urgency? The CEB was set 5 long years without looking for other sites when explicitly asked by the then Government to do so. Many attractive offers by world renowned Developers to build a plant and supply current at a very cheap rate, with no burden to the country, have been sabotaged. Are we to conclude that all these misdemeanors on the part of CEB - not to mention the mismanagement, and more, which are regularly exposed in the Media - have conspired to bring about a good result after all - namely to make the volcano like site in Kalpitiya an ideal spot for a coal power plant?

Mr. Swans, in his letter, explicitly asks Dr. Tilak Siyambalapitiya and the present General Manager of CEB for their views on the security situation at Norochcholai. Mr. Sirimal thinks that these eminent persons would not be wasting their precious and valuable time in answering a senseless argument. The silence of this usually voluble duo on this subject is deafening. Answers by proxy are not acceptable. Would they favour us with a reply?

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File photo: Proposed site for Norochcholai power plant. Putting up a power plant in Kalpitiya area is like sitting an important project on the top of a not-so-dormant volcano.