

India's Sethu Canal – a noose round Sri Lanka's neck?

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SHIPPING SCENE

With Roy Silva

"South Asia's worst maritime disaster occurred on 09/07 when tons of oil leaking from a cargo vessel which sank while transiting the Sethu Canal destroyed the entire and priceless fauna and flora in the Palk Straits and polluted the entire coastline of Jaffna Peninsula, Gulf of Mannar and Kilali Lagoon. The livelihood of over a million fishermen in India and Sri Lanka has been ruined."

This could have been the headline front page news of all the national papers of Sri Lanka and India, if in fact the Sethu Samudram canal was in operation and the Bangladeshi cargo vessel MV. Amriet Sha sank inside the Sethu Canal.

This vessel was on a voyage from Yangon (Rangoon) to Mumbai when it actually sank off the coast of Koggala. Oil which spilled from the ship has polluted and ruined 10 kms of the most valuable section of the beach used by the tourists. The livelihood of several hundreds of fishermen has also been ruined. The oil has flowed in to the Koggala stream killing the prawns.

Over 450 soldiers and several hundreds of volunteers including school children are working round the clock to clean the deadly oil from the beaches. Mind you only 50 tons leaked from the cargo vessel. The damage to Sri Lanka's valuable assets including both tourist and fisheries industry has yet to be calculated. How long it would take and whether we could obtain adequate compensation is yet to be answered.

The promoters of the Sethu Samudra Canal claim a vessel sailing from east to west or vice versa could save time and money by using the canal rather than circumnavigating Sri Lanka. Hence it is obvious that the Bangladeshi cargo vessel would have used the canal if the canal was in operation.

Ever since the Indian government decided in 2004 to dredge a canal through the vibrant but ecologically sensitive Palk Straits, Sri Lanka government as well as numerous organizations and experts both in Sri Lanka and India, expressed their serious concern about the possible damage to the environment and marine life. It

was highlighted, that deadly pollution from oil spills could occur due to possible collisions, grounding of ships, as well as dumping of oil by ships or even due to sabotage by terrorists. Our illustrious Foreign Minister, the late Mr. Kadirgamar was the only minister in Sri Lanka who had the guts to speak the truth against the decision to dredge the canal. One cabinet minister even supported the canal.

Even the Indian EIA report on the basis of which the canal is being dredged admitted the possibility of serious pollution in the following words:

Point of View

"Large accidental spills can occur when a tanker gets involved in an accident such as collision or grounding. In the present project, tankers carrying POL products will navigate through the proposed channel, hence there are possibilities of oil spills." (Para 9.2.11)

The response of the Indian bureaucrats when an official delegation expressed Sri Lanka's concern, was astrophologically simple "No it won't happen". The owners and the crew of Amriet Sha too would not have expected the vessel to sink and pollute our shores and kill the marine life and corals. But it happened. Because it happened on the high seas, pollution and damage to the marine life is much less than if it happened in the narrow Palk Straits killing even the most valuable endangered species.

A report on the Sethu Canal prepared by Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide, USA pointed out in a report prepared in 2004 and issued in November that in the past ten years some of the most environmentally damaging accidental oil spills have involved cargo vessels and not oil tankers. The report added, unlike land based Suez and Panama canal the Sethu Canal will be a part of the open sea surface and unpredictable storms and associated wave energies could lead to disastrous accidents.

According to a study commissioned by the UK Department for Environment for Food and Rural Affairs, the proximity of a shipping route to the coast line is one of

the strongest risk factors for powered grounding occurring within a shipping route. Whereas Sri Lanka is struggling to clear 50 tons of oil which spilled from the cargo vessel Amriet Sha, the Sethu Samudram Canal project envisage oil tankers with 50,000 tons of oil to transit the canal when in operation. It is beyond one's imagination the catastrophic consequence if such a tanker meets with an accident in the narrow Palk Straits. The Canal will be just 4 kms away from the boundary line between Sri Lanka and India.

India's response to all these is similar to its response to the 'Made in India' LTTE terrorist problem. The 60,000-dollar question is whether Sethu Project is a part of India's grand strategy to destabilize Sri Lanka permanently. The Canal together with other planned infrastructure development are designed to destroy Sri Lanka's transshipment business and the hub status of the port of Colombo. Unlike our ministers, the Indian Minister of Shipping Mr. Baalu declare these in speeches at public meetings. The canal will no doubt create for Sri Lanka both economic and security problems.

Those who dare not speak against India and call for explanations from Minister Anura Bandaranaike should remember the response of the US government when Al-Qaeda killed three thousand persons with their attack on the World Trade Centre. 'LTTE terrorists' and the resulting war has killed over 60,000 Sri Lankans of all races including several Sinhalese and Tamil leaders.

When The Island published my first article on the Sethu canal under the heading "India's dream canal shatters Sri Lanka's shipping dream", The Island cartoonist produced a most meaningful cartoon depicting a noose around Sri Lanka's neck called Sethu Samudra and India holding the end of the rope. This was published in The Island of 13/10/2004. How relevant this cartoon is in the context of imminent/permanent threat to Sri Lanka from the canal, as seen from the Koggala disaster.