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● Consumers of electricity asked to be on hold

Which will come first rains or powercut?

by ANTON NONIS

Overcast skies for a fair period of the day, but still without any positive signs of rain. The hydro-electric reservoirs are fast running dry. The Ministry of Power is wondering whether they are heading for a power crisis if the rains do not come within the next few days.

No doubt, there had been satisfactory rainfall in some parts of the country over the past couple of days. Unfortunately, nothing of it had filled the hydro-power reservoirs. Both monsoons, the North-East, South-West, and also the inter-monsoonal, pre-monsoonal and post-monsoonal periods have resulted in only scanty showers to the central province where most of these reservoirs are located.

Though the meteorologists were hopeful of the South-West monsoon to have set in towards May 21, things did not happen as expected. Deputy Director Jayatilke Bandara says that the delay in the monsoon is due to an atmospheric condition prevailing in the south-eastern part of the Arabian Sea. "There, the creation of some 'pressure cells' is causing a blockade of monsoonal rains in Sri Lanka," he says.

But it is said to be a temporary phenomenon. When the block eases off, the monsoon would set in, giving rise to rains in the South-West quarter of the country. Meteorologists say the block may exist for about a week and any filling of hydro reservoirs could be expected only thereafter.

A period of 'seven days' may appear too long for the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB). Their tabulations have shown that the water in the reservoirs are drying up too fast. And at that rate, it is feared a lapse in the rains might even lead to a powercut.

According to Water Management Secretariat of the Mahaweli Authority, all the hydro-power

reservoirs are several feet below spill level. Some of the worst affected are Moussakelle and Castlereagh of the Kelani System which are exclusively meant for power generation. The water contents in them are 11 percent and 19 percent respectively.

The worst affected ones, of those coming under the Mahaweli System are Victoria and Kotmale, which also provide water for irrigation as well. The present water levels in them are 23 percent and 24 percent respectively.

Water in the Samanawewa, coming under the Walawe System, is 34 percent. Sources said that the levels in the smaller reservoirs such as Norton, Laxapana, Canyon and Rantembe too are equally bad.

A daily power consumption would cause these levels to drop still further until a replenishment is made by the monsoon. The availability of thermal power which consists of turbines driven by gas, steam and diesel, is assisting greatly in circumventing the critical situation that has arisen.

The total of the thermal power plants that were available by 1995 could produce only 236 mega watts of power. With the increase of thermal generators over the years, the country is now in a position to produce an additional 409 mega watts of power.

The latest thermal generator that was added was the power barge imported from Japan recently which has a capacity of 60 mega watts. Presently, the engineers are busy installing the power barge.

Under normal conditions, about 70 percent of the country's power requirement came by hydro means. The balance was provided thermally. The necessity did not arise for the CEB to install all thermal generators that were available.

But the present conditions have warranted the

operation of the whole lot of thermal power plants to the maximum to meet the demand. On this score, the power supplied by thermal means had to be increased to the maximum, which accounts for 60 percent of the total requirement. The balance 40 percent is by hydro. A reverse of this nature arose as the hydro reservoirs were not able to meet the required supply.

According to CEB's Additional General Manager D.C Wijeratne, the water in the hydro-power reservoirs, at the present rate of consumption, would suffice only for another eight days.

The weathermen and the electrical engineers closely liaising with each other these days, are optimistic that the rains would arrive without further delay and avoid the powercut. The authorities want everyone to remember the agony the country had to undergo as a result of extensive interruption of power during 1996. No one wants that to happen again.

They say that the solution is relatively simple - switch off the unwanted bulbs, fans, airconditioners and other accessory electrical appliances whenever possible. But, it is interesting to see whether that is really happening.

The CEB has discovered that electricity had been consumed exorbitantly last Tuesday (May 23) as much as 20 million units. Generally, the daily consumption is between 15 - 18 million units. Even on the Vesak Poya Day with so many thousands of illuminations, the consumption had been only 15 million units, whereas last Tuesday it had been the highest recorded in the country. Investigations are being conducted to ascertain its cause.

The authorities say that it is still not too late to conserve electricity. Therefore, extra care by the consumer is imperative until the South-West monsoon sets in full swing to avert a powercut.