

21/07/00 Island

# Coal Power Project

There have been many letters written in the opinion page on the above project and I would like to draw the attention of the readers to two such letters written by M/s D. P. Chandrasiri former Chairman CEB on March 31, 2000 and Mr. K. J. L. Pieris of Negombo on May 01, 2000. Both these readers do not question the importance and necessity of implementing the coal power project speedily to avoid a power crisis and to assist in the development of our economy. Mr. Pieris in particular blames the authorities for prolonging the debate on the Coal Power without initiating action to avoid a serious power shortage in the near future. Both these writers in particular had one message which unfortunately has been written without adequate information of the current situation. Hence I wish to reply their main concern on the project which is the appropriateness of the site. Both readers seem to believe that Mawella site is readily available for the implementation of the project and for a variety of reasons is more suitable than the proposed site. Let me briefly take up issues mentioned in these two letters.

- 1) The site at Mawella was fully investigated and considered by experts the best.

This is totally untrue as Mawella site was never fully investigated and the study done was of pre-feasibility level and that too was carried out during the period 1989 to 1990. Further there have been no expert opinion expressed that Mawella is the best in Sri Lanka.

- 2) Mawella is the best site in terms of capital cost and reduction in transformer and transmission line losses.

This is a gross misunderstanding of the facts. Firstly what was envisioned for Mawella was the development of a 600 MW project whereas in Norochcholai what is envisioned is a 900 MW project. As characteristic of coal power projects the infrastructure development cost is fairly expensive and the unit cost of the electricity generated would therefore be cheaper from a site which can cater to a larger development such as in Norochcholai. Contrary to what Mr. Chandrasinghe has claimed that the cost will be about 40% cheaper in Mawella than Norochcholai, the cost in fact is 11% higher in Mawella than at Norochcholai for an installed kW. Therefore, Mawella is not the least cost option for the implementation of a Coal Power plant.

- 3) Comparison with the Wind Power Plant

There is no justification to compare this 3000 MW Coal Plant at Mawella on account of a perceived failure of the Wind Power Project at Hambantota and the fail-

ure of the Samanalawewa Project as indicated by Mr. Chandrasinghe. At the outset I must emphasize that none of the projects mentioned by Mr. Chandrasinghe are failures. The Wind Power Project was a pilot project aimed at assessing the techno economic viability of Wind Power connected to the national grid. The wind project during the feasibility studies were expected to have a plant factor of 17% depending on the type of wind generator used. During the initial year with all its teething problems the pilot project has generated 3,877 GWh yielding an annual plant factor of approximately 15%.

The Samanalawewa Project was originally designed to generate 361 GWh per annum with — 22 MCM of water released for irrigation purposes since the commencement of this plant with subsequent remedial measures, it has generated on the average 330 GWh per annum while releasing 90 MCM of water per annum for irrigation. This release is in excess of 68 MCM per annum than the planned release for irrigation which could have otherwise been used for power generation. Therefore I do not see the reason of Mr. Chandrasinghe bringing up matters which are irrelevant to the debate on the Coal power Project and that too to justify a site at Mawella.

- 4) No action talk only?

Mr. K. J. L. Pieris in his article on May 1 has brought to our attention that the debate on the Coal power project has gone on for two and half decades without any progress other than "No action talk only". To put the record straight, any meaningful action on Coal Power development in this country was initiated in 1985 with the commencement of the feasibility study for the installation of a 300 MW Coal Power Plant at Trincomalee.

However, due to a variety of reasons some of which are publicly known, we are engaged in an endless debate on why coal, when coal, and where coal. To a layman the answers may seem to be quite simple in the light of the rising demand for electricity and the cheapest source of providing electricity for a country where the fossil fuel has to be imported being coal. Therefore Mr. Pieris's argument that the only unresolved issue, to be the site is not correct.

Further contrary to his belief, Mawella is not accepted to be the best choice among the three sites already identified for the installation of a Coal Power Project. Mr. Pieris begs the authorities to inform the public of the special benefits of the site at Norochcholi and quotes Mr. Chandrasinghe in advocating the site at Mawella. Let me now briefly explain the justification for the Norochcholai site.

- 5) Justification for the Norochcholai plant

With the demand for electricity rising at around 8 to 10% per annum, within the next two decades almost 2700 MW of Coal Power will have to be added to the system. While Norochcholai can accommodate 900 MW, Trincomalee too, could accommodate 900 MW of Coal Power development. Initial investigations also pointed out that Mawella can only accommodate 600 MW of Coal Power. This too after reclaiming the Kudawella lagoon and displacing approximately 300 fishing families residing around Mawella compared to re-locating only 42 families living in the project foot print area at Norochcholai which is almost barren and is devoid of any useful cultivation except few acres of coconut and mixed crops such as sweet potatoes and onions.

As it has been stated earlier Norochcholai is very much cheaper per unit of installed power. A comprehensive Environmental Impact Assessment was carried out for which the clearance has been granted by the North Western Province Environmental Authority and the Coast Conservation Department among other statutory authorities. Well over 30 eminent local scientists have scrutinized the EIA report before granting the approval. All this has already taken well over eight years from the inception. Therefore, much time has already been spent on a comprehensive feasibility study and detailed designs whereas no such detailed studies have ever been done for Mawella.

In any other country, Coal Power development from concept to commissioning is only expected to take a period of six years at most. Even if that be the case, now to shift to Mawella would mean a further six years of extensive studies and investigations apart from the environmental clearance. With such delays the rising demand for electricity cannot be met unless we continue to install more and more diesel power plants in the system. Therefore if at this stage the site is to be shifted to Mawella instead of Norochcholai. Mr. K. J. L. Pieris will have to be satisfied having more and more diesel powered electricity at a much higher cost for his consumption. Therefore, while agreeing with Mr. Pieris that further debate should stop and CEB should get into action will only mean that this project should proceed as planned at Norochcholai and certainly allow Mawella site to be developed subsequently to meet the future electricity needs.

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