

Aren't our engineers competent enough?

by M. Chandrasena

We have allowed expatriate consultants and contractors to carry out all our development projects funded by international lending organizations, foreign countries and even by our own government. Why?

Because we Engineers have without any complaint accepted this position. We have been afraid to speak and protest in the interests of the country about the colossal waste of money spent due to the engagement of expatriate consultants and contractors for works which our own Engineers can carry out even better.

We, particularly those of us in senior positions in Government have allowed politicians and non-technical government servants to make decisions on technical matters, matters which have serious repercussions on the development of our country and the economy. We, have been afraid to make our voice heard, afraid to get up and speak, afraid to tell the truth and afraid to give the correct advice to those in authority.

When Tender Evaluation Committees make recommendation on tenders, these are over-ruled by non-technical persons and the tender is awarded to a tenderer whose tender does not even comply with the specifications. This has happened in several cases. The results have been great loss to the country.

Why do we accept these in silence?

We Engineers have

not taken sufficient interest in the development of our country. We have been devoting our energies mainly to our professional work. Even our Institution of Engineers calls itself a "learned society" and does not take sufficient interest in the welfare of our people, the poor people of our country who make the great majority of the population and who are hoping for a better life to come.

We do not use our expertise and the collective strength of our Institution which has in its membership the best and largest engineering talent of the country. It should take a prominent place in the development of our country. Why is this wealth of knowledge and experience not being utilised? It is the Institution of Engineers that can express the Engineers' views without fear or favour, and give correct advice in the greater interests of the country. Is this a possible reason why the Institution is ignored?

We have seen the damage done to our country and the economy as a result of wrong decisions and wrong advice given by foreign experts and rejecting good advice of our own specialists.

Foreign and international lending organizations have been advising on what they think is best for our country not what the country actually needs. Some of those in authority are ever so eager to accept advice from a foreigner and ignore sound advice from our own experts.

We tend to look up to the foreigners and bow to them. We have not got over that slavish mentality inflicted on us by the colonial rulers. Sad to say some of our own countrymen have also inherited the mentality of our colonial rulers.

We depend on foreign loans and aid to build potty little bridges and even to build latrines. There are many projects which do not require foreign loans and which can be implemented at a fraction of the cost by our own Engineers. There are projects which could have been carried out even with the local component that is provided for these foreign funded works.

An expatriate firm on a major Road project recently invited local consultants to submit offers for the design of a small bridge. The offers submitted by local firms were ignored and the work was entrusted to a foreign consultant at three times the cost some of the largest bridges in the country were designed and constructed by our own Engineers.

The Katunayake expressway costing some billions of Rupees of our own money, is entrusted to foreign contractors and consultants. Is there any participation by local firms? Whether this venture is an urgent need is another matter. This money could have been more profitably spent on power which is our critical requirement.

We are building expressways at tremendous cost while poor villagers do not have any

facilities of taking a patient to hospital - no dirt track even suitable for a two wheeled tractor, not even a foot bridge as means of crossing a river or stream.

Getting back to foreign financing, we blindly accept conditions laid down by the lending organizations. We do not even suggest that our local firms be accepted for at least a part of the work. Countries which do not have the engineering capability as our country, contest every clause in the agreement at negotiations and insist on local participation. Today the expatriate consultants and contractors use our talented Engineers as cheap labour to increase their profits. Some say that lending organizations require foreign consultants and contractors for our projects as a condition of the loan. This is totally incorrect.

Some expatriate consultants and contractors are training their own graduate Engineers on our projects paying high salaries in addition (at our expense) while our young Engineers are crying out for a place to get experience. There were cases where 'Engineers' who had no qualifications or experience at all, had been employed in our projects and accepted by us in silence.

When our Engineering firms and Engineers are employed by expatriate consultants and contractors they are not given any responsibility by these expatriate firms. They do not accept good advice given by our

Engineers in the interests of the project and of our country. They prefer to make blunders and get income in rectifying the blunders they make.

We have been having Road Rehabilitation projects funded by the World Bank and ADB for about 20 years and expatriate consultants and contractors are yet employed for this work. I have seen some work done by expatriate firms and supervised by expatriate consultants. They have their own way, disregard quality and cost. They will be out of the country when any damage occurs.

Not only do some lending organizations lay down conditions such as employment of expatriate consultants and contractors by devious means, some also require existing work in good condition destroyed. One case in point is the finance required for some bridges. I understand that a condition has been laid down that the existing Gampola Bridge on the Peradeniya-Gampola-Nuwara Eliya Road, which is in excellent condition should be scrapped if they are to provide funds for a new bridge. I hope this is not correct. Surely a second (one way) bridge can be provided leaving this bridge which is actually a landmark and should be preserved.

Another case is the two steel bridges that existed on the Colombo-Hambantota Road at Kalutara. The Highways Department which had prepared tender documents for the two new

bridges on their design had a condition that the members of the two old steel bridges should be marked and dismantled so that they could be erected at sites where wider bridges were not required. But these WERE CUT UP for removal. These steel bridges each consisting of 5 spans of 100ft. could have been used on minor roads. But these are in the scrap heaps or may have been sold as scrap.

Today expatriate consultants of international repute give us designs utterly ignoring local conditions, the public, and even economy.

In one Road Project hard laterite is excavated with difficulty and filled with crusher dust nearly 3/4m in thickness and rolled for days. No provision is made for draining storm water from the several premises on either side of the road. The large quantity of storm water that, was carried by the road drains that existed had to be demolished for the road widening. Now the new road will be flooded during heavy rains and no pedestrians will be able to walk on the footways.

It has been said that the disposal of storm water is a matter for the local Authority. The Consultants who are expatriates have been having their own way with complete disregard to the public and the residents on either side of the road. This I am sure they will not do in their own countries.

It was only the other day when I complained

about the absence of provision for drainage of storm water from the premises on either side of the road, which are at a higher level than the road, someone told me that it has been said that soakage pits have to be provided for the disposal of storm water by the owners of the premises. I hope it is not an Engineer who has said this.

Expatriate consultants and contractors are being treated by us with kindness and a great degree of tolerance to the extent that poor quality work is sometimes accepted. I have seen hot premix wearing surface being laid in the rain on a Trunk Road, blowing the water away with an air jet. No supervision by the expatriate consultants was apparently present.

If we take a note of events in the past where Electricity generation and Railways are concerned there are several instances where the wrong type of equipment has been obtained ignoring the recommendations of the Tender Evaluation comments and our own Engineers resulting in heavy losses to the country.

We Engineers have accepted these in silence forgetting the most important and sacred requirement in the Code of Ethics of Engineers (Clause 1) which states.

"Engineers shall hold paramount the safety, health and welfare of the public and proper utilization of funds in the performance of their duties.