Coal power, the most vital infrastructure

by Carlo Fernando

The President has declared infrastructure development as a priority. She has appointed several working committees to prepare reports on this subject and submit them to her before the September 15 2001.

It should be borne in mind that the most important infrastructure needed is Power. In the absence of this vital requirement everything else comes to a standstill. The following presentation is in this context and those who are entrusted to attend to infrastructure should submit this to the President.

In Sri Lanka coal Power was to be introduced in 1992. But it was obstructed at every turn. At that time I stated, that if coal power generation is postponed to 2007 as stipulated in the CEBs Master Plan for the electricity supply of Sri Lanka, prepared by Lahmeyer Consultants in 1989, Sri Lanka would be flooded with diesel and gas turbines, which have been vehemently condemned by the high level Kumarasuriya Committee in the 1970s when, mind you, oil was only US $ 1 a barrel. (Sessional paper No. 111 of 1975 - Report of the Committee of enquiry into gas turbine project and Mahaweli Ganga development project June 3, 1970). Now oil is US $ 25 to 30 a barrel. So doesn't this policy spell disaster for Sri Lanka? The flooding of the country with diesel plants is already taking place at an accelerated pace.

Power cuts in the Philippines

Today we see in Sri Lanka the same power crisis situation that the Philippines experienced some years ago. Following are excerpts from the article "power Crisis bites - Philippines" that appeared in the Financial Times - London, February 17, 1992 issue.

Diesel generators

"But their response to the mounting power crisis has been to adopt expensive quick fix solutions including purchase of barge mounted diesel generators. Such increases in generating capacity, as there have been in the past, have come from these mobile barges and from the 200 MW gas turbine project. The turbines were supposed to be used occasionally to top up supplies at times of peak demand, but their continued running is now essential to maintain the base load. The current power shortages are profitable for manufacturers of generators and power barges but not for the Philippines".

The above excerpts were quoted in one of my earlier articles 'Lesson from the Philippines' in a newspaper. But Sri Lanka is being driven exactly along the same disastrous path by the anticoal lobbies, which promote all types of impractical power sources except coal, the most widely used power source in the world.

In my paper 'Mawella Coal Power Project' which was read at the SLAAS Auditorium on July 8, 2000, this situation was referred to. Here are the relevant extracts from that paper.

"My suggestion to get over this crisis is to take up Mawella for the project. The CEB planners say that it will take 8 years if Norachcholai is given up and a new site is taken up for the project. I don't agree with this. I believe the following report about a similar crisis in the Philippines taken from the Asian Electricity - June 1993 issue will help our President to take a cue from former President Ramos and overcome this crisis.

Energy Crisis Law

"Energy Crisis Law to help the Philippines - President Fidel Ramos signed the Electric Power Crisis Act of 1993 which gives him special powers to address the country's crippling energy crisis.

'The Act empowers the government to enter into negotiated contracts for the construction, repair, rehabilitation and maintenance of power plants and to fix the rate of investment return to not more than 12 per cent of the current base rate.

'The electric power crisis law signifies the leadership's sensitivity to public clamour to end the power shortages once and for all', said the President.

"It also manifests our earnest desire to remove some of the major obstacles to our country attaining NIC status by the year 2000.

"Plant breakdowns and lack of new load stations have led to power shortages lasting up to 10 hours a day in Metro Manila and the rest of Luzon.

'These blackouts are estimated to cost more than US $ 29 million a day and have been the main reason for the country's near zero growth over the last few years".

With this Electricity Power Crisis Act of 1993, President Ramos had got the first unit in a 700 MW Coal Power Plant in Pagbilao Grande Island 120 km south east of Manila commissioned in 1995. That is in about 3 years. It is set in a bay similar to the Kudawella bay where the coal unloading jetty for the Mawella Coal Power plant is to be set up and about 120 km South East of Colombo.

The speedy implementation of this project was possible due to the elimination of all obstacles caused by very unreasonable men. Here in Sri Lanka if we are to get these projects through, our President too will have to act like President Ramos using special powers and silencing all foreign funded obstructionists whom the Indians call 'Enemies of the State - Terrorists'.

Power crisis in Sri Lanka

Our power crisis has fallen into such a deep rut, to overcome this; in the first place everyone should realize the gravity of the situation and the vital necessity of coal power generation for base load operation. If we fail in this the destruction to the economy can be far more than what is caused by the war. Mark what Prof. Gunawardena of Peradeniya University has said in one of his writings. "A government that fails to provide sufficient electric power is Doomed. Worse a nation short of electric power is Doomed".

The disastrous attack on the Air Force Base at Katunayaka proves beyond doubt how vulnerable the Norachchholai site is for such a large power plant planned to produce about 70% of the power in the system. See how badly exposed to danger is the 4 k.m, long coal unloading jetty in the Kalpitiya sea, a site too close to the people who have hostile intentions. The knocking out of his coal unloading jetty which would cut off coal supplies to the power plant will have catastrophic effect on the country as all our industries will have to be closed down.

Now it is planned to shift the Air Force Base to a less exposed site. Similarly it is necessary to act positively by moving the coal plant site to the Mawella in the South, definitely a safer and easily protected site for the coal power plant. However, the CEB planner argues that the security problem is the same anywhere. Then why is the Air Force Base shifted?

In our present hopeless situation it is only the President who can solve this problem. For a long time the Japanese and the British have shown interest in Mawella. In fact it is they who carried out a comprehensive site confirmation study at their expense.

Mawella

It is only an appeal from the President herself to the Governments of Japan and U.K. to construct a coal power plant at Mawella (instead of at Norachcholai which has to be set aside for security reasons) that can rescue the power situation. No government will come forward to do this job under the prevailing environmental laws, which lead nowhere. They will not want to face any upsets to their construction schedule due to damaging protests. So it is imperative that the President nullifies these environmental issues if the project is to be executed.

For the President to act, the CEB should give her the correct advice that Mawella is the best site in all respects, Engineering, Southern Development, and security-wise at present and this will enable its early implementation. She could be advised to act like President Ramos did in a similar power crisis situation in the Philippines in 1992 where a 700 MW oacal power plant was set up in 3 years.

If the CEB fails to do this as has happened during the past so many years, it has to accept the total responsibility for the power crisis which will certainly out do the economic set back and destruction caused by the war. People are suffering from power cuts and they will continue to suffer if the corrective steps I have pointed out here are not taken up.

It is certain that the CEB cannot and will not get this power plant constructed as it makes the unrealistic and negative assessment that it will take over 8 years if Melawi is to be taken up. This is a case where the CEB has to first invent the wawella to make a cart. Though this project is a major civil engineering task, there is not a single civil engineer specialized in this field of engineering and not even a civil engineer of any level engaged on this job. Thus the general impression in the CEB is that this coal plant can be set up anywhere.

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