

Nuraicholai - a wrong choice of site

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Subsequent to the recent media announcement that Cabinet approval has been given to proceed with the Nuraicholai Coal Power Project, a number of persons have contacted us, and inquired about our stance on this subject.

Our position all along has been as follows. While we had some reservations that the power plant could adversely affect the venerable shrine at Talawila, and the livelihood of the poor fishermen of the area, there were two overriding concerns, namely, the highly adverse harbouring facilities for import of coal due to proven monsoonal weather in the area, and the security factor. As these concerns corroborated by experts, with whom we kept constant contact - remain unchanged our well-known position regarding Nuraicholai Project too, remains unchanged, and we state it here, not in a spirit of confrontation, but as dutiful citizens who would not like to see our country embark on a scheme which is bound to fail, with serious consequences to our land.

It is unfortunate that, although five years have elapsed since the highest authorities in our country scrapped this project and asked to look for viable alternate sites, no serious effort has been made to find other sites. Officials, who should have known better, blindly clung to this unfeasible and nonstarter project notwithstanding concerns expressed by foreign and local experts.

Let us also not forget that the original choice of Nuraicholai was due to the fact that some powerful persons who did not want a coal power plant in their own area had simply pushed it to a marginalised place like the Kalpitiya peninsula.

It is also unfortunate that adverse reports made by technically qualified bodies and persons who did in-depth studies (for example, Japanese Consulting Institute, Master Divers, former C.E.B. consultant engineer Carlo Fernando, and various independent groups) have been swept under the carpet. These persons derived no profit whatsoever from the stance they

took. They had only the good of the country at heart. It is our view that, even at this late stage, their advice should be sought and respected by the authorities.

The cost factor

While we too would agree that coal power is cheaper, it is significant that the promoters of Nuraicholai, notwithstanding repeated requests made, have not presented to the public the likely cost of a unit of electricity produced at Nuraicholai. Impartial economists who took the trouble to analyse relevant data have predicted that even if power is generated at Nuraicholai some day, the cost would be prohibitive. Inter alia the following have been mentioned by reliable experts for the high cost of power produced at Nuraicholai: coal unloading in monsoonal weather in mid sea, possible periods without coal, special machinery for desulphurisation and for catching and disposing of ash, transmission cost to join to the national grid etc.. The Security factor adds another dimension here.

If we are not mistaken, both the PA and UNF governments accepted a policy of building a coal power plant in an alternate location through private financing. We believe that, at various times, advertisements too have been published to solicit expression of interest from international investors. One wonders what has happened to these policy decisions.

One also hears it stated that M/s. Ramboll of Denmark, whom the Government consulted on Nuraicholai had given its approval to the Nuraicholai Project. It is not so. As a matter of fact, Ramboll rejected outright the idea of the 4.2 km. jetty which had been the lifeline of the Nuraicholai Project. Regarding the barge transfer boat harbour proposal, Ramboll stated that there was need for further study. Ramboll warned, "In the case of both with jetty and barge solution, the unloading vessels will need special protection from the navy, increase of high alert situations." The presently stalled peace process and sense of political instability in the country adds poignancy to what we have been saying all along.



Nuraichoali - where the coal plant was to be built.

Of late we have come to hear of a third proposal - besides the jetty idea and the barge transfer idea. It is to transfer coal from Trincomalee to Nuraicholai using trains. Here one can legitimately ask: if coal can be safely unloaded at Trincomalee as proposed, why not build a coal power station too in that place? besides the problems connected with the sheer volume of coal to be transferred, and the enormous cost of laying brand new railway tracks even for a part of that length, and the question of securing the right of way for such a railway track, the question of time taken to get a major project like that off the ground, according to our experience, should make one think twice. That task might take longer than the time required to build a coal power plant itself! An excuse often being mentioned by promoters of Nuraicholai runs like this: "Now that the feasi-

bility survey of Nuraicholai has been done, we can start it immediately..." Unfortunately, some aspects of the feasibility report itself can be outdated by now, and making arrangements for train transport could necessitate further study. It is clear that Nuraicholai is a non-starter, and the earlier we jettison it for good, the better.

All this means that if the jetty idea is revised, the authorities would be going counter to Ramboll findings. If the barge transfer idea is taken up, further study, involving time and money, would be necessary. The train idea might never work. No waving of the magic wand is possible at Nuraicholai.

Duty to speak

It is not our intention to get into an argument on this subject. As concerned citizens and religious leaders we have done our bit

by alerting the authorities and our countrymen, even at the risk of being misunderstood. It would be an awesome responsibility for any government and the officials concerned to ignore timely warnings and launch upon a scheme which can compound our difficulties in the power sector and tie our country to huge foreign debts.

We have seen too many government projects that fail with dire consequences to the nation. Vociferous promoters of these failed projects, some with agendas of their own, are not around to take the fall. Rarely held accountable, they do the vanishing trick. It is our position that it is the right, indeed the duty, of citizens and leaders to alert the country to present and future dangers. We take this right and duty seriously enough to state firmly that this project is bad for the country and bad for the economy.