

Daily News

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The recourse to coal power

With the initiation of the first concrete moves to establish the 900 MW Norochcholai coal-fired power plant, not only is a long-felt need in Sri Lanka's power and energy sphere being met but a further milestone is being reached in our relations with China, an illustrious friend of this country who has been with us through thick and thin.

Apparently, what proved decisive in the long-drawn out process to launch the power plant was the meeting between the visiting State Councillor of the People's Republic of China,

Tang Jiaxung and President Mahinda Rajapakse. As our report said yesterday, on a request by the President, the Chinese Government agreed to finance the project entirely, to the tune of US \$ 455 million.

This is yet another generous gesture by China towards this country which would not go unappreciated by the people of this country. Among other things, the Chinese decision is also proof that it always pays for Sri Lanka to pursue a non-aligned foreign policy, which enshrines friendship to all and enmity towards none.

Despite the proposal to launch the Norochcholai coal power plant proving controversial among some, knowledgeable sections were generally in agreement that the power plant is a dire necessity if the country is to ward off the spectre of power shortages and attendant crises.

Vagaries of the weather have proved dependence on hydro-electric power, a very risky proposition while thermal power is turning out to be costly on account of recurring

oil price hikes, besides accompanying environmental costs. We have no choice but to have recourse to coal power which is a comparatively cost-effective energy source. The State would need to adopt a pragmatic approach in resolving problems of this kind and the deep distress experienced by all sections of the people during power crises in the past is likely to win public approval for the Norochcholai plant. Hopefully, the launching of the project would enable the State to sell power to the people at reduced prices, thereby lightening their economic burdens.

Objections to the Norochcholai venture in the past were based on environmental and social considerations and the State is obliged to examine these strictures impartially. It is duty-bound to reduce the adverse environmental repercussions - if any - to the minimum and ensure that persons and groups displaced by the project are provided alternative habitats and homesteads. It augurs well that the Government has taken into consideration the

need to ensure that no places of worship in the vicinity of the project are in any way affected.

However, the economic arguments put forward in defence of the power plant could hardly be faulted. Besides the need for alternative, practicable power sources, it could be seen that power and energy go to the very heart of the problem of alleviating the economic pressures on the people. Purse-easy power is essential for meeting most everyday needs. It is the soaring price of energy which tends to increase the cost of living on account of its cross-cutting nature. The link between the price of energy and food and transport costs, for example, hardly needs elaboration.

Accordingly, all pragmatic means need to be used to address the material and economic burdens of the people. We do not see any reason why coal power should not be tried out as long as it proves safe and economical. The State is compelled to think in the long-term in such situations.