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Moragahakanda Project threatens 10,000 acres of gem land

Gem Industry urges President to save land for sustainable gem mining parallel to the project

By Ashwin Hemmathagama

The proposed Moragahakanda Reservoir Project, which is scheduled to kick-off on January 25, 2007, will bury a vast area of highly potential gem bearing land.

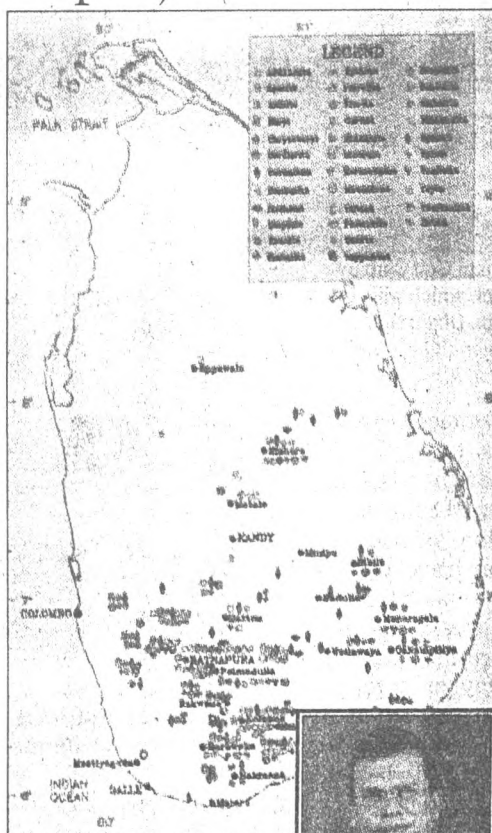
Association of Gem and Jewellery Industry of Sri Lanka (AGJI) President Thennakoon Rusiripala yesterday told *The Island Financial Review* that as an organisation dedicated to the development of the industry has requested the President to take appropriate action to secure the highly potential gem bearing land by allowing simultaneous gem exploitation with the project.

"We were delighted by the news that the above project is scheduled to commence on 25th January on a priority basis and wish to congratulate the President and the Cabinet of Ministers for this decision. However, as an organization dedicated to the development of the gem and jewellery industry in Sri Lanka, we have decided to bring to the notice that the proposed Moragahakanda Scheme encompasses a large area of highly potential gem bearing land extending up to the 10km post from Naula going under the reservoir. In addition, there is an identified Feldspar Rock Belt in the same area," he said.

"It is estimated that a minimum of 10,000 acres of gem land will go under water. What

we seek from the President is to exploit these lands simultaneously with the Moragahakanda project before it goes under water. Exploitation of these gem lands can be a part of the project for the first time in Sri Lanka while building the Sri Lanka's largest man-made reservoir. Most recent research conducted by geologists rate this area is second only to Ratnapura in gem-rich land. We don't see any reason why Sri Lankans should go to Madagascar in search of gem lands when we have highly potential gem-bearing land here," he said.

The Moragahakanda Development Project in the North-Central Sri Lanka is a multi-purpose water resources development scheme. The primary purpose of the Moragahakanda Project will be to provide increased water supplies to about 81,500 ha of drought-prone irrigation areas in the northern and central parts of



Distribution of gem minerals in Sri Lanka. Inset pic - T. Rusiripala



Sri Lanka. The project would involve construction of a dam of about 65 m height and two saddle dams of 42 m and 21 m height with a total crest length of around 1,200 m on the Amban Ganga tributary, forming a reservoir with some 570 million cubic meters of storage.

"This matter has been raised at various discussions held at the Laggala and Naula Pradeshiya Sabha meetings

with officials at primary level, but appears to have not been focused properly from the national point of view taking into account the large gem resource potential available and the opportunity that will be lost in harnessing them. "Several of our members in the area as well as in the industry have requested us to make representations on this matter with a view to providing the opportunity in a suitable manner to exploit the resources, while proceeding with the project. We would appreciate if the President could review this matter and grant an opportunity to a delegation from our Association to meet him in the national interest," he said.

Provision of additional potable and industrial water supplies to major towns in the region are foreseen, and the project will also incorporate a hydro-power station with an installed capacity of about 20 MW.

The objective of the feasibility study is the production of a comprehensive report on the technical, financial, economic, environmental and social feasibility of a storage reservoir at Moragahakanda, which will improve the standard of living and quality of life of those affected by the project, whether irrigation farmers or consumers of the project products, with an acceptable mitigation of any negative impacts.