

The scientific side of "Northern" development

Don't ignore the peculiar geographic, geomorphological factors governing land and water

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I would first like to refer to the opening lines of the opening address by the Vice President, South Asia Region of the World Bank, Micko Nishimizu at the Sri Lanka Development Forum on June 5.

"The time is now, indeed, to apply the very same talent of Sri Lanka that has drawn up many strategies and action plans to implementation on the ground, seriously, immediately and urgently."

The above statement is applicable to several regions of Sri Lanka; those situated in the low-lying coastal regions, particularly in the north, south and southwest.

The facts relating to the situation in the north, which has been going from bad to worse during the past few decades is given herewith.

With the new government extending arms of goodwill and peace to the

militant groups of Jaffna, there are renewed signs of hope for lasting peace and reconciliation in the north and east.

These signs come not a moment too soon, for we have all suffered long and beyond endurance.

When peace does arrive, it will cry out for prosperity and development, which the north has been denied for many years owing to the conflict situation.

There are already many development plans for the Jaffna peninsula and the north in general, many of them prepared by well meaning administrative officers and some by scientists.

It is important that these development plans, to be successful, should take into account the peculiar geographic, geomorphological and other scientific factors which seem to govern the land and water resources of the area.

I have with me photographic evidence to show that the northern coast of the peninsula is eroding and continues to do so. Apart from the loss of land, this situation has a diverse effect on the quality of ground water on which the economy of the peninsula largely depends. The situation in the Southern part of the Jaffna District (situated south of Elephant Pass) in the mainland, is certainly much better.

Considering evidence such as this and even more the geological structure of the Jaffna Peninsula along with the several islets now existing from it to Delft, it is quite likely that this is all that now remains of the many islands that probably did exist in the distant past. During the late 1960s, I had the opportunity to inspect certain sites in Jaffna, in my capacity as the Senior Deputy Director of Irrigation.

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But its scope of further development in agriculture will depend not only in the management of its existing irrigation schemes but in attempts to augment the water supplies that are

possible only from sources further south.

This is a task which cannot be confined only to surface water, but also to ground water.

The latter involves extensive ground water surveys at a regional level. In 1980, an "Integrated Rural Development Plan for Jaffna District" was prepared by the District Secretary/ Government Agent.

In preparing this Plan, it is on record that "the needs and views of the people of the district were also obtained by a system of consultation..... Senior offi-

cials of the district visited the people in remote village....in finding out conditions in which they lived, their needs and aspirations."

It further notes: "This plan envisages an investment of 750 million rupees over a five-year period and encompasses a wide range of development activities."

There is no doubt that a lot of spadework has been done in an honest attempt to achieve the objects of the exercise.

It is my view that the geography of the Jaffna peninsula and the group of islands is such that, unless serious attention is paid to the adverse oceanographic changes, and necessary thought and action taken, the degree of success that may be achieved by the above plan will be marginal.

The speech made on the 25th of August 1994 by the then Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar in

Parliament on the election of the new Speaker is a statement that should go down in history. The following are excerpts from it:

"Mr. Speaker, I wish to join with enthusiasm in the acclamation with which your election to this high office has been received on all sides of this honourable House ...everybody has said today and during the past bruising campaign in the country, that the one thing that all the peoples of this country want very much and yearn for is peace, tranquillity and an end to dissension.

They worked in a manner in which this country can be justifiably proud. I do not think there is a single other democratic country in the world that polls so heavily, and so clearly as we do.

That is something that all of us must be always immensely proud of and out of that has come this one great message. Let it

never be said, that the Sinhala people are racists.

They are not, Mr. Speaker. They are absolutely not, and I think this election has demonstrated so handsomely that this particular argument can be laid to rest for ever."

On the heels of peace and reconciliation must come meaningful and effective reconstruction and development of the war-ravaged areas of the island. The economic and physical development of Jaffna will be daunting, not only because of the impacts of the war, but also because of the particular natural conditions that prevail there.

The solutions lie in meeting the challenges of a changing environment. A basic requirement in achieving the best possible answer lies primarily in ensuring a united and undivided Sri Lanka, be it in the north or similar situations in the east or north-east.