

Get Norochcholai Coal Plant going

From March 1, the CEB will increase the price of electricity by 25 per cent. The main reason given for this was insufficient rainfall in the catchment areas, in 1999 and 2000. This is not a new phenomenon as weather patterns are unpredictable. Therefore as we are dependent on water and its conservation, we have to look for an alternative. The next best alternative is coal and as it is, coal fired power plants have become absolutely essential to Sri Lanka. But the issue is still on the balance.

So far, only 56 per cent of the households in the country have electricity and the demand is growing at the rate of 8 per cent annually. But as hydropower cannot meet the growing needs of the country it had been argued by experts that the use of coal is a must.

According to field studies, coal is the cheapest form of fuel that could be used to generate electricity. It is also the most economic source of primary energy. Based on reports, coal which cost Rs. 4.50 would serve the same purpose as a litre of diesel which cost Rs. 24.50. Furthermore, the price of oil is unpredictable whereas coal prices are not only stable but also reliable. Therefore, both developed and developing countries use large coal power plants. If coal is not used as an alternative fuel, by 2004 the price of electricity per unit will cost Rs. 9.00 which is three times the present domestic price.

According to feasibility studies made during the last few years, the best location for a coal plant is Norochcholai in the Puttalam district. This project has gone through the Environmental Impact Assessment and relevant authorities have granted environmental clearance. Experts have also proposed at least 4 or 5 more coal-fired power plants if the country is to face a major power crisis and if the rest of the people in the country are to be supplied with electricity.

But opposition to the chosen site at Norochcholai has come mainly from Dr. Marcus Fernando, Bishop of Chilaw. His concern is the St. Anne's Shrine at Thalawila

located 11 kilometres away from the site. He had said that the pilgrims to the site could be affected due to heavy security in the area because of threats of LTTE attacks. This logic holds no water. Dr. Rayappa Joseph, Bishop of Mannar put forward the same theory of "security" when the army swamped the pilgrim town of Madhu in June 1999 and rescued it from the grips of the LTTE. The Bishop made a call for the removal of the army presence at Madhu and strenuous attempts were made to evacuate the army from the shrine premises.

In fact, after the LTTE was driven away from Jaffna, Madhu area had been a lush recruiting ground for the LTTE. And the decision to take over the pilgrim town of Madhu was because the Christians from Southern Sri Lanka had not been able to attend the Madhu Festival for years as it was under rebel control. Since the army took over, thousands of pilgrims have been making their way safely to participate in the festival. This fact cannot be denied.

The reference by the Bishop of Chilaw about "serious threats of LTTE attacks" gives the impression that this area is controlled by the LTTE. If so, the building of the coal-fired plant and the presence of the army would be a blessing for the pilgrims in terms of security. However, the question of LTTE attacks may not arise as their strength has at present withered due to new equipment used by the army. As their wings have been clipped, they are now walking cap in hand behind mediators to initiate peace talks.

It is with regret we state that perceptive observers have noted that whenever there was a conflict with the LTTE, the Catholic church backed them and even became their

spokesmen. Their "invisible hand" is no longer a public secret. This is confirmed by Mr. S. Dixit, the former High Commissioner for India, who stated in his book, "Assignment Colombo" (P. 228) that, "what was fascinating was that the Tamil Catholic clergy kept arguing in favour of the LTTE throughout my tenure in Sri Lanka." It is because of their blatant one-sidedness that the credibility of the Catholic church as neutral bystanders had been eroded on issues of national interest.

In this connection, we may also add that the headline in one of the week-end newspapers was that behind the protest against the coal-fired power plant were multinational corporations involved in supplying electricity to the country, landed proprietors at the site and smugglers at Kalpitiya.

The building of the coal plant at Norochcholai and the presence of the army in the vicinity for security is not in the interest of the LTTE. Furthermore, LTTE policy is to sabotage development. With the opening up of the area and the provision of security by the armed services there will be more opportunities for pilgrims to visit St. Anne's shrine at Thalawila.

As such, the good Bishop should reconsider the stand taken by him and support the project, without wilting to pressure groups.

There is at the moment an energy crisis and with threats of blackouts, if steps were not taken to install the coal plant at Norochcholai, the path will be paved for a serious crisis situation to develop sooner or later.

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Opinion