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Time running out for power crisis

Coal, petroleum or...?

by ANTON NONIS

The time left in the 'one-hundred day deadline', or rather the period allotted for deciding on the type of raw material, Sri Lanka would utilise for generating power on a mega scale, is running out.

There is choice of selecting either coal, petroleum or some kind of material with the required intrinsic force in it for creating power, depending on cost of production and other advantages.

However, nothing new in the subject. It was something that had been discussed many times over in the past. Power being a priority area, has compelled for quick action if the increasing demand was to be met with success.

Coal was thought to be the most favourable substance the authorities had in mind. They based their argument on unit cost of production. Generating power by coal had been shown to be much cheaper compared to that by using diesel.

The price of diesel was doubled than it was a year ago. Using diesel to run gen-

erators is discouraging, sources say.

But under the present circumstances since there is a severe power crisis, there does not appear to be any other option left for the Government but to use diesel even at prohibitive cost.

It was shown during the last regime that the unit cost of production was much higher, in the region of Rs. 14. But, investigations had revealed that this was an excessively high figure and is alleged to have arrived at due to malpractices and corruption somewhere down the production line.

The Ranil Wickremesinghe government had found the unit cost to be in the region of Rs. five, if diesel was used to run generators.

With regard to coal, already feasibility studies have been done for well over five years at different locations, spending millions of rupees.

The coastal stretch from Negombo, Mawella and downwards was explored. It was seen that Norochcholai in Kalpitiya was the ideal for the setting of the coal power

plant. Yet no final decision was made on it.

No doubt, using coal for creating power is the next cheapest to hydro-power. When Norochcholai was earmarked for the setting of the plant, it was doubtful whether sufficient attention was given to practical difficulties that might have arisen on that location.

Whatever the position, the biggest obstacle for coal plant in Norochcholai had come from the Christian community in the region. The stand of Bishop Rt. Rev. Dr. Frank Marcus Fernando who protested vehemently on this issue has not changed one bit. Among the various reasons forwarded for their disapproval also includes mass scale environmental pollution which might happen once the power plant was installed.

Considering the present power crisis, asked whether there was some leniency in their thoughts, Bishop Fernando said, "How can we allow it, very well knowing the damage the power plant would cause. We feel it is in the wrong location." As anal-

ysed by experts, the biggest problem at Norochcholai is the construction of the four-and-half kilometre long conveyor belt. This is to be erected at sea to transport coal from the ship to the plant site.

State Engineering Corporation chairman, Ariyaseela Wickremnayake said the sea was shallow in this area. The required depth for a ship could be obtained only at about four-and-half kilometres from the shore, thus it would not permit the ship to travel any closer.

The unloaded coal from ships has to be carried on conveyor belts.

Thus, conveyor belts upto this length would be needed for the task. Mr. Wickremnayake said this issue would cause tremendous practical difficulties for constructors and would also be extremely costly.

In comparison, it was subsequently shown that Hambantota could be far better than Norochcholai for the power plant installation.

Experts have found that Hambantota was a better location than Norochcholai. In

Hambantota, the required depth for the ships could be obtained within one kilometre from the shore line.

If that was the case, then they say that the necessity for an arduous construction of four-and-half kilometre long conveyor belt would not arise. It is seen then the type of belt needed in Hambantota would be much shorter. As such the depth would be a deciding factor on the project.

Besides the problems connected with belt construction, the other difficulty would be the unloading of coal using barges to carry cargo from the ships to shore is even more difficult.

Though coal is currently being explored for generating power on a large scale, it is apparent that there might be better types of raw material for creating power. Some of the experts have suggested that a petroleum refinery could be ideal and had been the subject of discussion for so many years.

It has been stated that a petroleum refinery would not have any of the costly constructions as in a coal plant

and would also be devoid of other shortcomings. A petroleum plant is said to be advantageous in the long run. Some of the disadvantages associated in a coal based power plant, as listed out by experts are, large quantities of ash collections which would be hazardous to the environment and also the length of time required for the installing and commissioning of the plant.

A petroleum refinery, on the other hand, in addition to generating power, would produce a series of by-products. Some of these are Liquid Petroleum Gas (LPG), Bitumen needed for road construction and other types of products that are currently being imported to the country.

Bunker fuels would be another by-product in the refinery which could be sold to vessels. They happen to bypass Sri Lanka for replenishment of such stocks from Singapore.

Whatever the case is, the experts indicate that their suggestion was nothing, but food for thought.