

Norochcholai not the correct place to erect coal power plant

Given below is a summary of a talk given by the Bishop of Chilaw, Bishop Frank Marcus Fernando, at the Centre for Society and Religion recently.

* The place (Norochcholai) is too shallow. The coal carriers have to stop 4.2 Km away from the shore. Transport by barges during monsoon-prone choppy seas are impractical. Obtaining of cheap power from Norochcholai can be an illusion.

The late Engineer E. Carlo Fernando, who wrote at length on this subject, used to say "We will have a beautiful power plant at Norochcholai. Only, the coal and the power will be missing".

* The security problem, in relation to the Power plant itself, and the ships bringing coal, which was mentioned from the time Norochcholai was mooted, has come to the forefront in recent times. Kalpitiya peninsula is the backyard of the Jaffna-Mannar axis.

Recently there have been attacks on Navy boats in Mannar. On December 22, 2005, two Navy boats were attacked. One was sunk, and 3 sailors were killed. Recently, a correspondent in an English daily, writing on this subject, pointed out that the power plant at Norochcholai and coal carriers and barges would be easy targets for anyone who wished to do



Protests over the Norochcholai coal power plant

damage. He stated that, going by experience, Cease Fire Agreements are of no use. The correspondent compared the building of a power plant at Norochcholai to the erection of a power plant atop a not-so-dormant volcano. Is it worth risking the much-needed power supply and future of our industry by building a power plant in a place like Norochcholai? Even the Rambol Report states that the Navy would be required to provide security to coal carriers during anchorage.

* Experience of numerous countries regarding environmental damage caused by coal has to be given serious consideration. The Internet gives ample information on

this subject. Fly ash, bottom ash, seepage, heating of sea water, respiratory ailments etc have been mentioned. Minimizing these will cost much money. Some types of damage will be irreparable.

* There is also the question of enormous expenses involved in putting up the power plant itself and getting ready its connected structures like a harbour and barges.

Even soft loans have to be repaid with interest. Knowledgeable persons have pointed out, even in the Media, that the estimates presented by the CEB to the Government are not realistic. The Government should hold a full-scale inquiry.

evitable constraints on pilgrims due to security, bustle and activity on sea and land on an unprecedented scale will spoil the peace and serenity of this Shrine which is the second largest Christian shrine in Sri Lanka.

In case a war breaks out, the Shrine would be in serious jeopardy. Christians ask whether the Authorities would take such liberties with sacred Shrines of the majority religion.

* Everybody agrees that Mawella in the south is a more suitable place to erect a power plant (security, sea depth etc). But the majority community there, with the assistance of a well known Professor of Botany, protested vehemently stating that the power plant would cause a great deal of pollution causing endless damage to plantations, animals and human beings.

That site was abandoned. The minority communities at Norochcholai and its surroundings - Muslims and Christians - feel that they are being treated as second-class citizens. Their objections are being bulldozed.

* The argument being put forward by some CEB officials that the power plant at Norochcholai has to be erected immediately in order to bring down the cost of power is deeply flawed. Extra production costs due to transport of coal and making good various

forms of damage have already been mentioned.

From the moment Norochcholai was announced more than a decade ago, there was strong and sustained opposition to the choice of that site. But the CEB carried on, regardless. 6 years ago, the then Government rejected Norochcholai site and asked the CEB to look for alternative sites.

The CEB did not obey. The present problem is a creation of the CEB. After blundering so much regarding the choice of place and mode of transferring coal (jetty idea, then bringing coal by land from Trincomalee etc) there is no guarantee now that the present plans of CEB are not deeply flawed.

* Taking all these factors into consideration, it is wise, even at this stage, to call off this Project once and for all and look for alternative sites/sources of power. When the crunch comes, the present vociferous promoters of Norochcholai would have played the vanishing trick.

The poor country will have to carry the burden. Let it not be said at a future date that responsible people who loved the country and had had no vested interest, had failed to give timely warning to the Authorities about the dangers connected with Norochcholai.

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