

Japan's tax money to destroy Sri Lankan waterfalls

by Hemantha Withanage
Environmental Scientist

Japanese Bank for International Corporation (JBIC) is planning to fund the controversial Upper Kotmale Hydropower Project (UKHP). The UKHP is yet another project proposed by the Ceylon Electricity Board as means of enhancing the power supply. This project will destroy 7 major waterfalls in Sri Lanka - a part of our national heritage.

In Sri Lanka only a few waterfalls remain untouched. Waterfalls are a non-renewable resource, which needs to be preserved for future generations of our country. But unfortunately the recent events leading to the UKHP do not guarantee the preservation of this unique natural resource.

The impacts of the UKHP are as follows.

1. The destruction of 7 major waterfalls and thereby causing the loss of scenic beauty, which will affect tourism.
2. Major constructions 50% of which are within the earth slide prone area.
3. Increase in the possibility of flooding in Talawakele Town and submerging of the Talawakele town.
4. Increase in soil erosion around the project area.
5. Resettlement of over 1000 families and lack of suitable lands for resettlement.
6. Danger to the railway line.
7. Possible drying up of the area due to 22 km long tunnels.

The UKHP project, which is expected to be complete in the year 2006, has always been a controversial issue. The proposed Upper

Kotmale Hydropower by the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) is expected to generate 531.8GWh per annum, while destroying seven of our country's pristine waterfalls i.e. St Clair major, St Clair minor, Devon, Puna, Pundal and Ramboda.

Although the water is renewable, waterfalls are not renewable once you destroy them they will be gone forever. There are number of ways to generate electricity, but no way to create waterfalls.

The underground power station (this is under an active earth slide), tailrace tunnel, access tunnel, cable tunnel switch yard administration building are all located within a well known landslide zone, which can be clearly seen in the geological map. The village Niyangandora was declared as an unsafe area and the inhabitants have been evacuated to safer places few years ago under the Kotmale project. The present delicate stability of the hillside could be disturbed by the proposed construction activities such as deep excavation for the switchyard and the portals of the tailrace, access and cable tunnels rock blasting for the excavation of these tunnels and construction of access roads. What is most disturbing is the fact that more than 50% of the project cost is to be invested in this vulnerable location. Furthermore the lives of the operating staff of the power station and the administration building will be under constant threat. Should the construction activities trigger a landslide, the whole project will have to be abandoned as there is no way of relocating these facilities elsewhere. If this area is not safe for human occupation now, how can it be safe in the future, particularly after disturbing the delicate

stability? Locating these installations knowingly in an unsafe area is highly irresponsible.

This project was twice rejected by the Central Environmental Authority (CEA) and once rejected by the former Secretary to the Ministry of Transport, Environment and Women's Affairs.

The Secretary Ministry of Irrigation Power and Energy, which is the project-approving agency (PAA), approved the project (subjected to approval by the CEA) on 11th October 1994. However, the CEA, which is responsible for the environment, by letter dated 23rd February 1995, denied the approval for the said project. On the 4th August 1995 the Secretary Ministry of Transport, Environment and Women's Affairs completely rejected the appeal forwarded by the CEB. Then an addendum report on the alternative option called the Yoxford diversion was studied. However the inadequate report showed that the alternative is not feasible and asked for the approval of the original proposal. However it was again rejected by the Central Environmental Authority.

Thereafter in December 1996, Ceylon Electricity Board re-appealed the decision reached by the CEA against the project. Finally at this appeal hearing the Secretary Ministry of Forest and Environment concluded by granting approval to the UKHP on political grounds without any public participation.

It must be stressed while the public opinion was considered that all stages of the decision making process no member of the public was invited for the appeal. Therefore EFL sought relief for the injustice in the Court of Appeal (CA1023/98) seeking a writ of certiorari quashing the secretary's decision. As set-

tlement only EFL was granted a hearing, but the Secretary re-approved the project without giving proper consideration to the EFL's opinion.

Even though it is the accepted norm that all parties to the original decision should be given an equal opportunity to voice their views, the Secretary has completely over ruled this by granting approval on 27th March 2000 without hearing the public and the affected.

At this point the Sri Lankan public had lost confidence in the CEA process, which has become yet another meaningless administrative exercise for granting approval for environmentally harmful projects.

Granting approval for the UKHP project is a totally politically biased decision which is very undemocratic and environmentally and socially destructive. Prof. Malik Ranasinghe who did an economic analysis on this decision stated that this decision is a very costly and harmful decision.

We are aware that the JBIC is planning to provide financial assistance for this environmentally and socially unsound UKHP. We believe that Japan has no right to supply funds to implement this undemocratic, and environmentally unsound decision of the Sri Lankan Government. Furthermore, Japan, which preserves its waterfalls as "holy" sites, has no right to destroy our waterfalls, which are a part of our natural heritage.

We should remind the JBIC that Samanalawewa and Kirinda Harbour are very good examples of the use of Japanese tax money is environmentally and technically non-feasible projects. Japan should decide whether they want to get the blame for another disaster.