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CEB engineers firmly support hydro and coal power projects

By Munza Mushtaq

A powerful trade union of the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB), yesterday alleged that powerful oil based power plant lobbies supplying costly electricity to the CEB were trying to block the government's move to implement the long due Norochcholai coal power plant and the Upper Kotmale Hydro Power Project (UKHP).

Sources attached to CEB Engineers Union (CEBEU), told the Daily Mirror that once the coal power plant and the UKHP power project are completed, there would be a 'severe hit' to all thermal (oil) power plant operators as the CEB will be generating less power from thermal plants.

"The cost for a unit from either the coal or UKHP projects would be only around Rs. 2.50 a unit, but it costs between Rs. 8 and 13 a unit when the same is generated by oil based power plants," the sources noted.

Meanwhile, the CEB Engineers Union issuing a statement yesterday vowed to go to any length to ensure the coal and UKHP projects' speedy implementation.

"We severely warn the disruptive elements not to hinder the implementation of these projects, which are in the best interests of the people of this country," the Union warned.

After years of delay, the government has now taken a firm decision to pro-

ceed with the construction of Norochcholai coal power plant. The government has also re-confirmed its decision to proceed with the Upper Kotmale Hydro-electric Project.

CEBEU welcomes these decisions of the government, which has been taken for the well being of the country, even at this late hour, the statement said.

CEBEU also noted that these two power projects would produce electricity at a cost less than Rs. 2.50 per unit and will help boost industry in Sri Lanka enabling economic growth and extension of this essential service to nearly forty per cent of the population who are

still waiting to be served.

"The projects were intentionally delayed by various interested parties, mostly citing religious and political reasons coated with invalid technical reasoning, often applying pressure on the governments in the face of national and provincial elections. Consequently, to meet the demand and to avoid power cuts, CEB was compelled by successive governments to purchase electricity from private parties for prices ranging from Rs. 8 to 12 per unit.

CEB has been driven to bankruptcy due to such exorbitant costs. One wonders whether the planned projects were delayed intentionally to pro-

mote private electricity purchase. Politicians, priests and lobbyists were actively involved in it," the union charged.

Today, CEB runs an overdraft in excess of Rs. 25 billion, and has been forced to default on long-term loan repayments due to the treasury. Presently, CEB is losing Rs. 2.70 on each unit of electricity sold to consumers, thus going down a bottomless pit. In the end, the industries, businesses and other consumers would be the victims.

Obviously, this situation cannot be allowed to continue. CEBEU has taken a decision to firmly stand by these two projects and extend its unstinted support for their im-

plementation.

We reiterate that our members would do their utmost to ensure the speedy construction of these two power plants to produce electricity from year 2009 at much lower costs. We assure the general public and the people of Norochcholai and Talawakelle that the social and environmental conditions stipulated by the Central and Provincial Environmental Authorities would be strictly adhered to by our members in the construction and operation of the two power plants.

Both power plants have received full environmental clearance under the Environment Act after the due process; the statement added.