



The Anticipated Power Crisis of 2018-2019

Asoka Abeygunawardana blasts CEB's "Lies and Myths"

In view of intense discussion on a looming power crisis in the coming years, The Sunday Island spoke to Asoka Abeygunawardana, a long time activist in the field of renewable energy and the present Chairman, Strategic Enterprise Management Agency (SEMA) on relevant issues.

Interviewed
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There has been much exposure in the newspapers on a power crisis that is due to happen in 2018-2019. The CEB has laid the blame at the door of the government, saying that it was because they stopped the Sampur power plant that this crisis will occur. Is this correct?

There will be a power crisis in the near future and this is because no new power plants are slated to be commissioned during the next three years. But let me be clear on this – the Sampur power plant was due to be commissioned in 2021-2022 so there is absolutely no way that it can impact a crisis that is going to happen in 2018-2019. The CEB has therefore lied blatantly in an attempt to discredit the government.

Now, be that as it may, why did this problem crop up in the first place? Was government policy to blame?

Not at all. Once again, this is a problem that was created by the CEB itself. They had no new power plants planned in the five years after Lakvijaya (Norochcholai) and Upper Kotmale were commissioned in 2012. NOT ONE. Now, Sampur was supposed to have been commissioned as far back as 2012 but because of their own internal issues and problems they had to postpone this to 2016. Yet, they couldn't

Sampur was supposed to be built by 2021 and has absolutely no bearing on the anticipated crisis of 2018-2019. The CEB is blatantly lying in order to mislead the masses.

build this even by 2016 and delayed it further to 2021. These delays didn't occur because of the government but because of delays on the part of the CEB and their point venture partner, the Indian state owned company NTPC. They simply didn't get it done and they have given no reason for the tardiness on their part either. Therefore, contrary to what the CEB accuses the government of, the CEB has to take the blame for it and there is no getting away from that fact regardless of what lies they are promoting to the people in the newspapers. The government had no hand in stopping this being built in 2012 or 2016 but it stopped it from being commissioned in 2021 which is way past the crisis period as I told you earlier and has no bearing on that at all.

Why was the Sampur coal power plant stopped?

I am going to give you two reasons why and they are not limited to Sri Lanka but to the entire world.

The first reason is that coal has been globally rejected. Over the last decade, there have been no new coal power plants being constructed in the west. When aging coal plants were decommissioned they were replaced by either renewable energy or Liquid Natural Gas (LNG). During that period, the only countries that built coal power plants are India and China and this is why coal demand increased despite a drop in demand in Europe. But what is the situation now? In 2014, China reached its coal peak and completely stopped constructing coal power plants. India has significantly slowed down and is gradually moving towards large scale renewables also. So, is there any reason for Sri Lanka, which has NO COAL RESERVES to go in for coal plants and keep them running for the next 30 years when the entire world is rejecting it? The short answer is no. The long answer is NO. Therefore, the government decision to stop this mad policy from continuing is completely correct. The reason why coal has been rejected

by the entire planet leads me to the second issue.

The second reason is that fossil fuels are the biggest contributor to global warming. Global temperatures have increased by 1°C already and we cannot stop it increase by another 1.5 °C by 2025 and cannot stop it going up to 2 °C. I am sure you know that of all of the fossil fuels, coal is the biggest culprit in increasing global temperatures. Next comes oil and then LNG. This is why there was the recent Paris agreement. It was to stop this increase by aggressively rejecting fossil fuels. The Paris agreement had a stipulation that 55 countries should agree and the total emissions of those countries are at least 55% of the total global emissions. This stipulation was reached just last week when the big polluters China, America, Europe and Brazil signed, resulting in 78 countries agreeing with a total emission volume of those countries reaching 58%. Therefore, now, the Paris agreement is enforced according to its articles. Against this backdrop, it is not just sound public policy but mandatory policy against global agreements to stop the Sampur plant altogether.

The CEB dragged its feet on Sampur and instead of commissioning by 2012 it delayed and delayed all the way to 2021 and now claim it is the government's fault. This is a massive and vicious lie.

But we still do not have a solution to the upcoming crisis although it is clear that the finger points directly at the CEB. Are there any alternatives to coal that we can use to respond to that?

Not only are many options available, all of them are far better options than the very tired and very stale and very fallacious coal...coal...coal mantra of the CEB. The first thing that the people must understand is that coal is not an option because coal plants simply cannot be built in a short period of time and as I said earlier, the issue there is with the CEB. However, we have two much better options here.

The first is to go for renewables and the second is to go for the very expensive but comparatively easier constructed emergency oil power plant whose unit cost can go up as high as Rs.40. However, the government does not need to put any pressure on the people with our availability of renewables. The CEB already has a few remaining large hydro projects at Uma Oya, Broadlands, Gin Ganga, Seethawaka and Moragahakande. They can and should fast track the construction of these and avoid the crisis quite easily with far less running cost and environment cost than coal. The parallel option is demand side management. The Sustainable Energy Authority (SEA) says that industrial electricity consumers can increase their usage efficiency dramatically. What the government can do is spend a fraction of the cost of building emergency oil power plants to provide technical and financial help to these industries to increase their consumption efficiency and the crisis will be significantly mitigated if not completely neutralized.

The second option for our country is that the Government has already taken a decision to go for rooftop solar through which consumers can become producers. Did you know that we can easily have 300MW of rooftop solar by 2018? Yes. It is that simple. Of the remaining 600MW of micro-hydro applications already with the SEA, about 300MW can be quickly built and commissioned. The other 300MW cannot be exploited because of serious social and environment concerns. These two will be fast tracked to completion by 2018-2020.

If indeed there is this wealth of renewable resources available, why isn't the CEB going in for them?

This is a good question. The answer is amusing if the issue is not so serious. When the private sector wanted to build such plants, the CEB jumped in, claimed they will do it and said they will commission a 100MW wind power plant in Mannar. They never did it and are simply dragging their feet on this matter and not allowing anyone else to enter the playing field either although another 100MW of wind power can be exploited by the private sector. At the very least, the 100MW that can be built by the private sector should be allowed quickly.

How about biomass electricity? Is there an issue with going for this despite 41% of our energy requirement coming from biomass?

Yes of course it is not only possible but part of government policy. The mandate of the President very clearly states that rural communities will be empowered to support such projects. As you point out, there has been an

The entire world has stopped building coal power plants. The Paris Agreement was ratified just last week and will eradicate the use of fossil fuels quickly. The CEB is going the other direction and is still promoting the coal mantra to a country that doesn't even have coal reserves while actively slowing down on commissioning wind and solar that they have in abundance. The reason is clear: They are aligned with the coal and gas mafia and have just one goal: To sell out the country and its people.

issue with obtaining a sustainable quantity of bio-feed. However, the Toxin-Free Nation Program of the President has already got a strong, immediate strategy to massively increase glycidic plants across the country to act as the primary feed stock while providing raw materials for toxin-free fertilizers.

So there is no real requirement for emergency power?

Most certainly not. Look at what is happening. The CEB does not want to commission its wind power plant in Mannar being a dog in the manger. It is not looking to fast track large hydro. It is yacking away at coal and oil. The reason is simple: They are aligned with the coal mafia and the oil mafia.

The CEB says that if peak demand cannot be met, then they will be forced to implement power cuts during peak hours and they say that solar is not a solution for peak demand. What do you have to say about that?

Well, the fact of the matter is that we already have sufficient installed capacity to meet our increase in peak demand through 2018-2019. The fear of the CEB is that Lakvijaya will fail. Well, that issue has to be solved by them. If they installed substandard power plants that break down constantly, that is a problem they created for the government and the people and a problem that they have to solve. Furthermore, that they say that solar is not a solution for peak is also amusing. When solar is used during the daylight hours, it simply reduces the need for generating hydro power and that saves the water head to be utilized during peak time so their claim is one big round lie.