

Error, terror and environmental disaster in SL

(Continued from last week)

by D.L.O. Mendis

Postscript

There are two important issues that need to be explained further, hence this postscript. Firstly, a brilliant item of work by S Arumugam, a former President of the Institution of Engineers whose birth centenary was honoured by the Institution on August 31, 2005, needs to be elaborated, namely the Arumugam Plan, A River for Jaffna. Secondly, the wrong understanding about the ancient irrigation works among engineers, will be discussed with an analogy from the US military – industrial complex.

First, about S Arumugam. He retired as senior Deputy Director of Irrigation in 1965, and was invited to be Chief Engineer and General Manager in the Water Resources Board by the Chairman, Hon. Hema Basnayake, who had retired as Chief Justice of Ceylon, and taken up what many thought was a position outside his field, or below his dignity. But, his invitation to Mr Arumugam who soon became a Director of the Board, was an indication of his knowledge of men and matters, and Arumugam amply justified his faith, with the publication of his comprehensive Water Resources of Ceylon, in 1969. Many years earlier, Arumugam had come to the attention of CP de Silva with the publication of an article in the Sunday Observer in October 1954, drawing attention to the fresh water that flowed into the Elephant pass lagoon whenever the Iranamadu reservoir spilled, which was about once every five or six years. The end result was the Elephant pass lagoon scheme, when CP de Silva became Minister in 1956, which as time passed was transformed into A River for Jaffna, the Arumugam Plan. The essential items in this grand plan are a closure structure with one-way gates at Elephant pass, the western end of the lagoon, and a closure earth dam at the eastern end of the lagoon, both structures to prevent saline water diluting the lagoon. Next, there was to be a cut channel to connect the Elephant pass lagoon with the southern end of the Vadamarachchi lagoon at Muliyan; the Thandamannaru barrage at the northern end of this lagoon; and the Ariyalai barrage at the southern end of Ariyalai lagoon whose northern end is near Thondamannar. All these structures except only the Muliyan canal were built. Improvement to quantity and quality of groundwater in the peninsula was evident, and much appreciated.

When Gamini Jayawickrema Perera was Minister of Irrigation and Water Management he visited Jaffna on April 9, 2003, and found this project in a sad state of disrepair. He was convinced that restoring it, to benefit from Iranamadu spill water, would improve the quality and quantity of Jaffna groundwater, but by that time, access to Iranamadu was denied by the LTTE. It still is the best joint project that should be discussed between the two sides, in the cause of a durable Peace. (Figure 9). Some people who support the Moragahakande reservoir and NCP canal project seem to think it will benefit the Jaffna peninsula. They need to know about the River for Jaffna, the Arumugam plan.

Second, the analogy of the US military – industrial complex is used to explain why environmental disaster that springs from the Water Resources Development Plan, 1959 is allowed to prevail. The military-industrial complex of the USA has been recognized as the source of the arms race that fuels global armed conflict. In her concluding remarks when handing over the Presidency of Pugwash to Joseph Rotblat, at the 38th international Pugwash conference in 1988, Nobel Laureate Dorothy Hodgkin said:

"In the USA alone it has been estimated that the arms race represents a fantastic enterprise that awards contracts worth 150 billion dollars annually, and employs about 3.5 million workers. It is enormously profitable and here lies the major difficulties". (Pugwash Newsletter, 55)

President Eisenhower, in his farewell State of the Union message in 1961, said:

"In the councils of government we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist".

In a later essay on "How to Control the Military" in the USA, Professor John Kenneth Galbraith made the following shrewd observation:

"This warning was to become by a wide margin the most quoted of all Eisenhower statements. This was principally for the flank protection it provided for all who wanted to agree. For many years thereafter; anyone (myself included) who spoke to the problem of the military power took the thoughtful precaution of first quoting President Eisenhower. He had shown that there were impeccably conservative precedents for our concern". (Galbraith, 1969, 49).

Senator Fulbright in a Congress speech, also said:

"I do not think the military-industrial complex is the conspiratorial invention of a band of 'merchants of death'. I almost wish it were, because conspiracies can be exposed and dealt with. But the components of the new American militarism are too diverse, independent, and complex for it to be the product of a centrally directed conspiracy. It is rather the inevitable result of the creation of a huge permanent military establishment, whose needs have given rise to a vast private defense industry tied to the Armed Forces by a natural bond of common interest" (Fulbright 1967, 36181).

By analogy with these statements, we may conclude that the source of environmental disaster in Sri Lanka as described does not spring from a conspiracy, but as the inevitable result of a number of circumstances that led to a lack of self confidence among decision makers in our country. Whereas the British completed one of the best topographical land surveys in any country in the world, and R L Brohier used these 'topo' sheets and the written records of the colonial era to compile his extraordinary 'Ancient Irrigation Works in Ceylon', public servants in a later day and age allowed themselves to be misled by their own ignorance into believing that we needed foreign aid and technical assistance in the area of water resources development, rather than learn from our own heritage.

This was of course encouraged by politicians interested in money, and this was an open invitation to the economic hit men that John Perkins has described, beyond even the famous invitation to the Robber Barons, when the Presidential system was installed in 1978. Perkins 'confessions' document his experiences in resource rich countries like Panama, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Columbia, Ecuador, Iraq, and Venezuela. Sri Lanka does not as yet qualify in this regard, although there are statements about off-shore oil, but our strategic position could be of interest to global war-mongers. Nor do we know what interest EHM's may have in our ongoing conflict.

A recent example of how an EHM works may be the blatant disregard for truth when describing the ancient irrigation works which have for long been an object of interest for foreigners. When the great flood of December 1957 took place AEC de Silva Gunasekera was Director of Irrigation and S Arumugam was his principal Deputy. I was myself an assistant engineer in Allai scheme where the flood waters of the Verugalaru and the Mahaweli ganga met across the scheme. The Irrigation department restored all the damaged irrigation works without any lump-sum foreign aid, in time to achieve a bumper harvest next Maha season, and this was described by Arumugam in his Presidential Address to the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science, Section C, in 1960. But, a foreigner wrote in a Sunday paper (not the ISLAND) August 20, 2005:

"It happened in 1957 – 58, when 53 large and 1,500 minor dams breached ... but luckily in those days there were a number of British engineers to help with relief and repairs".

In this same article there is another similar dishonest statement:

"The last serious breach was in 1986, where 129 people died and 11,000 were negatively affected, at a cost in today's prices of Rs 6 billion. Can the government afford such a lapse or a similar bill today?"

The full story of the Kantalai bund breach in 1986 as documented in the Arumugam Commemoration volume was reproduced in this article. The above statement is a gross distortion of the truth, in the manner of an economic hit man's aim to commit the nation to a large debt. We should take note of this, track him down, and expose his intentions.

Continued next week