

Construction Chamber calls for lion's share of infrastructure development projects

by ELMO LEONARD

Sri Lanka is expected to receive one billion US dollars per year for the next three years for infrastructure development, mostly in the North and East, following the donor conference in Tokyo, scheduled for June.

The Chamber of Construction Industry of Sri Lanka (CCISL) is appealing for the lion's share of the infrastructure development work and wants foreign contractors and experts kept out, unless there are projects such as power generation or development of harbours, which may require foreign specialisation.

The state of a country's construction industry is a barometer to gauge the growth of the country's economy. When foreign consultants and contractors are awarded projects happening in Sri Lanka, the money paid to them leaves the country, draining the economy, CCISL President, Surath Wickremasinghe reminded. Awarding contracts to foreigners also arrests the growth of the local construction industry.

CCISL members say that they have the necessary expertise to handle most of the forthcoming work here. In the past, when construction projects were awarded to foreigners, around 90 percent of the work was carried out by local subcontractors, engineer Tudor Munasinghe said. CCISL called for a master plan to be drawn out by the relevant ministries and CCISL, for awarding and monitoring the work undertaken.

Sri Lanka is far behind other countries in

infrastructure development, while lack of infrastructure keeps foreign investors out, Munasinghe said.

The country is in dire need of adequate road networking and a solution would be the development of expressways. However, only the Southern Expressway is currently under implementation and that also at a slow pace, Munasinghe said.

The CCISL membership regretted the recent decision to limit the Southern Highway to a two-lane roadway and hoped the land would be reserved for future development of a multi-lane expressway.

The Katunayake Expressway is currently stalled. The country is also in need of a high-speed railway network, and a mass transit system for Greater Colombo. It also needs an optical fibre cable network to cover the main regional centres.

Sri Lanka needs sewerage systems for its towns. Only part of Colombo has a sewerage system at present, where raw sewerage is pumped into the sea. This may not be permitted for long under international covenants. The cost of power in Sri Lanka is the highest in the region, CCISL Vice President, D.D. Wijemanne said.

The Government should speed up its decision-making process. For instance, while there is a need for a coal power station, the proposed one was shifted from Trincomalee to Mawella and Norochcholai to Hambantota and may be shifted again. While most countries are doing away with coal power projects, Sri Lanka has one in

Seeks work in Iraq

Sri Lanka's construction industry wants to be part of the \$ 500 billion rehabilitation and reconstruction work in Iraq, following the war carried out there by the Coalition Forces.

The Chamber of Construction Industry of Sri Lanka (CCISL) told the media that India was already on the ball, and had sent a delegation to America, along with the members of the Indian Federation of Chambers to canvass for work in Iraq.

CCISL President, Surath Wickremasinghe wants the Sri Lankan Government to take a cue from India and use political connections to obtain subcontracts for the projects awaiting reconstruction.

At least 200,000 workers from the local construction industry could be gainfully employed in Iraq, Wickremasinghe said.

Iraq has to restore over 25,000 schools, 200 hospitals, 2000 healthcare centres, 10 major power plants, 40,000 kilometres of road network, bridges, 74 airports including six major airports, harbours

and telecommunication facilities and other projects. CCISL Vice President, S.N. Wijepala said Indian Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee's government apparently does not want to be left out from the reconstruction business in Iraq. India had gifted tea and other items to establish humanitarian connections prior to canvassing financial projects.

The Indian Federation Chairman, A.C. Mutiah hoped to obtain at least 20 per cent of the subcontract work available in Iraq.

Indians are reported to be more confident about winning contracts than other Asian countries like South Korea, China, Taiwan, Philippines and Malaysia.

CCISL called on local ministries such as Foreign Affairs, Industrial Development and Enterprise and Labour and the Chamber of Construction and other chambers connected with industry and labour to meet as a group and formulate an action plan to obtain work in Iraq and other countries.

the pipeline. A coal power project should have a source of coal free of sulphur, to prevent environmental pollution. The Upper Kotmale hydro power project also needs to be implemented.

A sense of urgency in removing constraints and decision making is needed if donors are to make commitments towards the country, CCISL Treasurer H.B. Budhisena said.