2nd Dec 2001 Times

News_PCS_2001-7.pdf

Power crises: the nightmare continues

By Ruwanthi Herat Gunaratne

Just the thought of another power cut makes people want to scream. Are the power cuts really over? Have we got over those dark nights?

There are no guarantees; was the gloomy picture which came out at a recent meeting of top energy officials and experts. The symposium was on 'Sustainable Energy Options'.

Energy Conservation Fund Chairman Lionel Pinto said that as a developing country, Sri Lanka is experiencing an annual demand growth of 6% for electricity. A hotly debated issue between energy planners and environmentalists is whether the government should supply this demand and to what extent it should manage this demand growth.

When considering the complex issue of identifying the right mix of energy resources, the long-term national benefit and the final price to be levied on the consumer become important considerations. Hydro, coal and natural gas emerge as short and medium term options while much promise is offered by thermal generation in the long term.

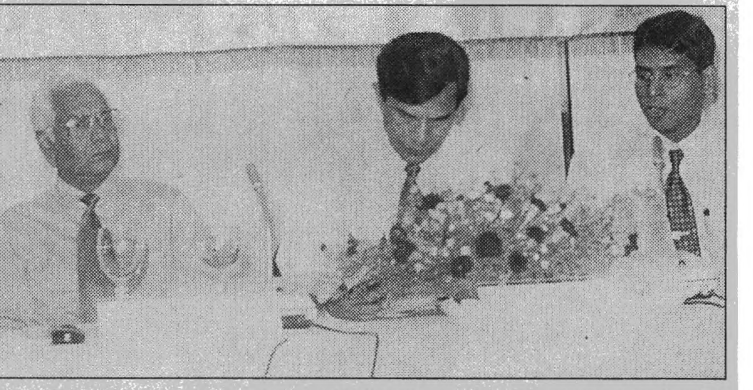
But there are still many problems to be resolved. "It is of vital importance that work on the Norochcholai coal power plant is started as soon as possible," says Dr. Tilak Siyambalapitiya, who serves as a free lance consultant. The extra cost for the CEB to generate that amount of electricity from oil burning plants each day will be Rs. 44.8 million. The project is already 900 days behind schedule, and has cost the economy losses of Rs. 40,000 million, which will have to be passed on to the consumers if the government is to prevent a heavy debit.

Although coal deposits exist in nearly every region, commercially significant resources occur only in Europe, Asia, Australia and North America. Using coal, which will be a solution to the present crisis, has its own problems.

For we need to import coal from countries such as Australia and thereby spend precious foreign exchange. Sri Lanka will also need to build harbours and ships that will be able to carry the coal. The other factor would be the persistent wrath of environmentalists.

So what is the solution in the face of forecasts that if the present situation is anything to go by, fuel imports will exceed plantation earnings by 2004?

A different idea, that of a biomass economy, was presented by P. G. Joseph and Dr. Ray Wijewardene. It is a long term plan and not a quick-fix. Fuelwood farming using short rotation coppicing species had been undertaken by local universities and researchers have found it promising. Land, about 1,700,000 hectares, suitable for fuelwood plantations is readily available in the form of chena and shrubland. The first harvest could be in 12 months and in six-month cycles afterwards.



L-R: Energy Ministyr Additional Secretary Michael Warnakulasuriya, Mr. Pnto and Moratuwa University's Dr. Priyantha Wijetunga.

Pic by J. Weerasekera

Harvested branches should be sun-dried, bundled and sent to power stations where they would be burnt under controlled conditions.

The heat generated could either be used to turn steam turbines or converted into combustible gas to run an electric generator to produce power.

"This is the most benign of all thermal generating systems," explained Mr. Joseph from the Ministry of Science and Technology.

On the contrary, Asoka Abeygunawardene says, "I don't think the country requires a radically new National Energy Policy to march towards sustainable energy. The existing national energy policy is strong enough to handle the situation."

Whatever the final decisions of the Ministry of Land, Irrigation and Energy are, the people can only hope and pray that their days in the dark are just a past nightmare.