

CEB's questionable approach to coal power development-2

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With regard to coal power, the most essential power source to provide a reliable and economical power supply, the CEB talks of only Norachcholai — the worst site for a coal power plant based on imported coal. It is worse than Trincomalee securitywise. There are also serious drawbacks in civil engineering aspects. Mind you siting a coal power plant is a civil engineer's task and not that of an electrical engineer. The fault lies here. So far for any power development work the CEB gets down foreign personnel paying them hundreds of million rupees ignoring the local civil engineering expertise.

The promoters of Norachcholai claim that local and foreign experts have recommended this site. Let them reveal who those experts are. This project was shifted to Norachcholai from the JCI favoured site Negombo by some electrical engineers who did not have anything to do with these coal power studies. Mind you officials although given high flown designations in their work places and letters added in front and behind their names, do not become experts overnight by virtue of these impressive titles.

When Black & Veatch USA - Trinco Coal Power Consultant - made studies for an alternative site they also considered a coal power plant to be sited in Puttalam area. If so coal has to be unloaded in Colombo and then transported to Puttalam by train. They never approved an unstable 4 km long jetty protruding out into a stormy monsoonal sea.

Those who are to be blamed for this utter mess are foreign funded environmentalists, the diesel lobby, inexperienced professionals, educated troublemakers, power hungry characters, professional jealousy, conflicts between civil and electrical professionals and the 'you propose I oppose national trait'.

President not to be misled

It is to be noted that it is the educated that misled President Premadasa and got work on Mawella stopped. Again the educated misled the Minister of Power & Energy Chandra Bandara and got the coal power plant shifted from Negombo, the JCI favoured site to Norachcholai the worst site. The President CBK rightly cancelled the site for the project. Now once again the educated are stubbornly trying to mislead the President to get the order cancelled.

Had the JCI plan on Negombo been carried out as scheduled by the FCI without any interference and intrigues by self-styled experts from here, coal power generation would have been a reality in 1999 - now it has become a lost case.

Since the President cancelled the Norachcholai site and ordered the CEB to move to another site, now two years have passed and the CEB has done absolutely nothing in this respect. The CEB says that not one coal power plant but several such plants are necessary. To achieve this what did the CEB do? They removed all the engineers in the coal power branch, who had gained some coal power expertise since the studies for the Trinco project began. Now can you believe it, this branch has only one engineer and one peon. This shows the CEBs hypocritical approach to coal power.

Alternative sites

Regarding alternative sites the CEB can only talk about Hambantota, Galle, and Matara. None of them are suitable sites for the early implementation of a coal power plant. These same officials never speak about Mawella, the best site after Trincomalee. Are they plain dumb or resentful? May be Mawella has become a dirty word for the CEB. Why does the CEB shun good sites and favour unsuitable ones is the million-dollar question. Once a CEB high official said that there is a 'presidential decree' against Mawella. President Premadasa was misled and he stopped work on the Mawella Project. In the same misguided manner President Premadasa supplied arms and money to the LTTE. Does this mean that the present government should continue such unacceptable actions?

The following are some relevant statements made by the late Mr. A. C. H. Pereira the eminent electrical engineer of the DGEU/CEB in his capacity as a Consultant to the CEB, extracted from his articles 5 appeared in the CEB's 1992 publication under the title 'Coal Power for Industrialization and National Progress in Sri Lanka'.

From Article No. 18.

'It is a stark tragedy that the lobby of rabid environmentalists has at last succeeded in persuading Premadasa to order the abandonment of the Mawella (Ruhuna) coal power project. This crowd of people was never heard of in the old days. The lobby obviously has very strong vested interests at stopping work on this project. Why all this publicity?'

'...I consider the anti-coal lobby to be a danger to our beloved country. Steam power comes in 500 and 1000 MW units and it would be a crime to instal diesel units of 20 to 30 MW to make up even 300 MW in place of coal.'

'... Coal power station chimney stacks are 100s of feet tall whilst diesel ones are rudimentary and pollute the ground directly.'

'If Mawella is shelved the Government will be compelled to instal more diesels at Sapugaskanda at disastrous results.'

From Article No. 26

'If we do not have coal now, I say we will have to stew in our own juice. Our children's children will undoubtedly suffer, for growth is the essence of life'.

The CEB has spent Rs. 450 million on Norachcholai. Forget about it. What the CEB engineers should do now is to persuade the President to get her Members of Parliament to tell the people in the South, the importance of the coal power plant for the development of the South and save the country from a catastrophe. It is the safest source of base load power we can have to operate factories and provide employment. The Mawella project can be quickly implemented too.

If the CEB does not have plans for Mawella, I will produce reports and plans prepared by Alexander Gibb, UK (Victoria Consultant). If our President follows the example set by President Ramos of the Philippines in the power crisis situation in that country where he got a 700 MW coal power plant constructed in 3 years, we can succeed in our attempt to get a coal power plant speedily constructed at Mawella. It is the duty of the CEB to brief the President correctly on this matter.

Concluded