Learn from President Ramos to evade power crisis in 2004

by E. Carlo Fernando
Former Power Development Consultant, CEB

The CEB asserts that crippling power shortages are certain from the year 2004 if coal power generation is not commissioned before that year. According to the CEB only the coal power plant at Noracholai, Kalpitiya now under study can avoid this power crisis. Ever since the project was taken to the Kalpitiya area, I have opposed it mainly on security grounds.

Now according to reports, the President who is also the Minister of Defence has agreed to cancel the Noracholoai coal project. But the engineers have failed to advice the President how to get over this looming power crisis. Their solution is only to insist on the Noracholai coal power, in which the 4 km. long coal unloading pier is faced with a serious security problem due to the threat from suicide bombers.

My article on this subject 'Coal power - yes, but not a dead plant' was published in the editorial page ('The Island' - 6.9.99). In the same page there was the article 'There should be no place for terrorism in a democracy' taken from the Indian newspaper 'Hindu'. It was very appropriate on the part of 'The Island' to have published these two articles on the same page. Here the authorities and the CEB officials can see the dangers posed to the security of the coal-unloading pier in the light of deadly human bombs. This is the biggest worry we have to face at Noracholai.

My suggestion to get over this crisis is to take up Mawella site for the project. The CEB planners say it will take 8 years if Noracholai is given up and a new site is taken up for the project. I don't agree with this. I believe the following report about a similar crisis in the Philippines taken from the Asian Electricity June 1993 will help our President to take a cue from former President Ramos had overcome the crisis.

Energy Crisis Law

'Energy crisis law to help the Philippines - President Fidel Ramos signed the Electric Power Crisis Act of 1993 which gives him special powers to address the country's crippling energy crisis.

'The Act empowers the Government to enter into negotiated contract for the construction, repair, rehabilitation and maintenance of power plants and to fix the rate of investment return to not more than 12 per cent of the current base rate'.

'The Electric Power Crisis Act signifies the leadership's sensitivity to public clamour to end the power shortage once and for all' said the President'.

'It also manifests our earnest desire to remove some of the major obstacles in our country obtaining NIC (New Industrial Country) status by the year 2000.

'Plant breakdowns and lack of new base load stations have led to power shortages lasting up to 10 hours a day in Metro Manila and the rest of Luzon.

'The blackouts are estimated to cost more than US$ 29 million a day and have been the main reason for the country's near zero growth over the last few years.'

With the Electricity Power Crisis Act of 1993, President Ramos had the first unit in a 700 MW coal power plant in Pagbilao Grande Island 120 kilometres south of Manila commissioned in 1995. That is in about 3 years. It is set in a bay similar to the Kudawella bay where the coal unloading jetty for the Mawella coal power plant is to be set up and about 120 kilometres south east of Colombo.

Eliminated obstacles

The speedy implementation of the project was possible due to the elimination of all obstacles by very unreasonable men. Here in Sri Lanka, if we are to get these projects through, our President too will have to act like President Ramos using special powers and silencing all foreign funded obstructionists, elements whom the Indians call 'enemies of the state'.

There hadn't been any Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) reports and display of such reports for public scrutiny which are nothing but meaningless exercises because hardly any one is knowledgeable enough about this subject to talk sense. These are all hatched by the developed West and introduced to the developing world to suppress development here.

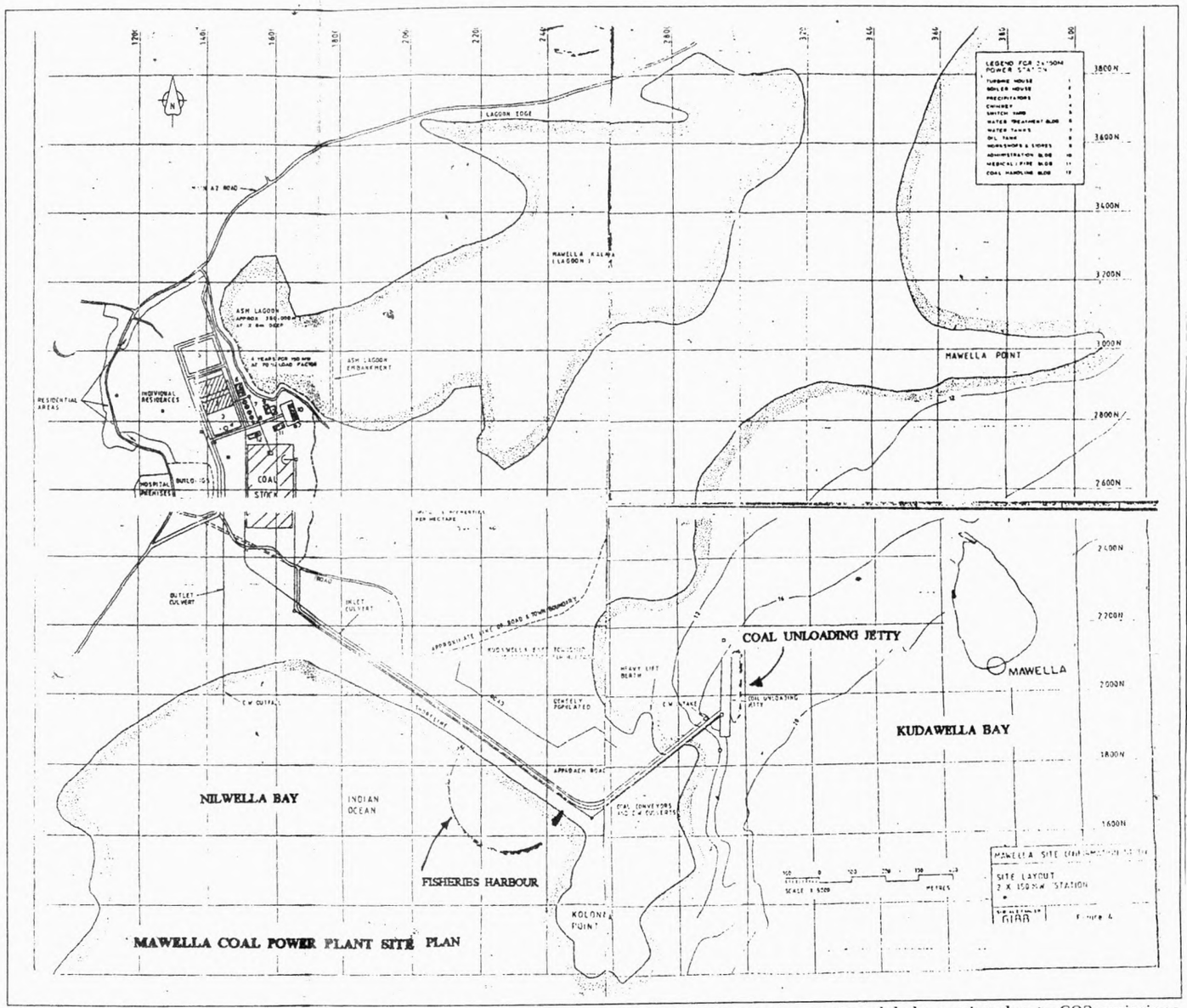
For successful speedy completion of these projects another very important requirement is to engage well proven reputed project developers, consultants and contractors specialised in this particular field

Remember how the Mahaweli projects were successfully and speedily completed. There were no EIA reports. Well- reputed firms were engaged on the projects. Only outline plans were available. The construction of infrastructure - roads, construction camps, coffer dams, diversion tunnels excavations, power lines, water supplies, design of dams and power plants were all carried out in parallel. That is how they were executed so rapidly.

Mawella

When the CEB realised that it was not possible to proceed with Trincomalee coal, I identified Mawella and did reconnaissance surveys. This was followed by site confirmation studies by two engineering teams - one by Bhck & Veatch Inc, USA and the other by Alexander Gibbs and Partners, U.K. All these studies confirmed that Mawella is a fine site for a coal power plant.

I should say that this site is even superior to the Trincomalee site, for a medium size coal power plant because all the requirements are present here in simpler form - Civil engineering, environment, electrical transmission, national development. Standard size coal carriers 60,000 dwt can be brought by the shore instead of installing 4 kilometre long coal-unloading jetties. Here the land surveys, geological explorations by drilling, sea depth studies have been done. If the usual baseless unreasonable anti-coal protests are neutralised, and a well proven project developer is engaged on the project it is certain that a power plant at Mawella can be commissioned quite easily before 2004. If it can be done in the Philippines in 3 years, why it is not possible to get it done in 4 years in Sri Lanka.



There were reports that a fisheries harbour is being built in the Kudawella bay, where the coal-unloading jetty is to be set up. The harbour is not in the Kudawella bay, but in the Nilwella bay, also called Kudawella West, which is adjoining. It is west of Kudawella bay. See sketch.

The bounden duty of CEB

It is CEB's bounden duty to put up the proposal to set up the coal power plant at Mawella to the Minister and the President without any delay, bearing in mind what the CEB planners say that a delay in getting the coal power plant will cost Rs. 13 million a day. In the light of my presentation here the President's decision to cancel the Noracholai site is not a setback, rather it is a blessing in disguise. I am confident that the Minister and the President will accept this safe proposal.

When coal power was mentioned some years ago, it was treated like a devastating satanic monster. Newspapers used to mostly publish anti-coal propaganda. It is not so now. People have realised that they have been taken for a ride by anti-coal lobbies. It is a harmless source of power, except that it is black. However, today there are effective controls to arrest black coal dust. Still die-herds continue to poison the minds of innocent people .

Flue gas filter

Where the environment is concerned what is important to us is to maintain and operate efficiently the flue gas filter unit, which is provided. This is the unit to arrest all coal dust. It is the absence of these filter units in old power stations and badly maintained filter units, *which have given a bad impression about coal power plants. Emission's from modern coal power plants are minimised and controlled.* Besides whatever emissions from Mawella coal plant will pass at tangent to the coast both ways and blow over the sea.

There are carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions. We need not be concerned with this. The real culprits here are the USA and the highly developed countries in the West. To control development in the Third World, the first world is exerting pressure to obstruct the construction of coal power plants under the guise of preventing global warming due to CO_2 emissions and depletion of the ozone layer. The foreign funded environmentalists carry out this policy of their foreign masters.

The CEB states that not one coal power plant but many are required. Then along with Mawella, Negombo too should be taken up. This is also a very attractive site. It is in the load centre. Trinco and Noracholai should be kept reserved and plans preserved for use at a future date, when these sites become conducive, security wise, to implement the project.

The Annual Report 1978/79 of the Central Electricity Authority, India, shows that, that *organisation alone had monitored 92 coal power projects at different stages of development - in investigation, planning, design, funding, construction, and so on.*

Even here in Sri Lanka when the accelerated Mahaweli was done, Polgolla, Bowatenne, Victoria, Kotmale, Randenigala, Rantambe, were all handled in parallel. Power development is an ongoing process. As long as the population is increasing and the standard of living is rising, economic developments associated with water and power projects have to take place.