

Norochcholai: Rs. 20 million lost per day and many will regret

Dr. Tilak Siyambalapitiya

It is now too late. The coal power plant will not be ready for operation by year 2004. All designs have been ready for over one year. The funds are ready. Environmental clearances are ready. This large 70,000 million rupee investment that was to stimulate growth in all sectors of the Lankan economy is yet to get off the ground.

Meanwhile, CEB in a desperate bid to keep the power supply going, is hiring all kinds of expensive oil burning power plants. These temporary power plants will soon become permanent. Lanka is already a country run on stand-by generators.

There will be many regrets. Electricity customers will surely regret that they did not do more to assist the Government to make a firm decision to go ahead with the coal power plant. Industries will regret that they did not do more, individually and collectively to ensure that their electricity comes at a lower cost from coal power plants. The Chambers are silent, as if they do not care about the future costs and reliability of electricity. Professional institutions conduct seminars. The Government is preparing for elections. The opposition is marking time.

You electricity consumers! Make no mistake. Our country is drifting towards its worst-ever power crisis, which will be a permanent crisis. Electricity prices will rise to no less than double the present rates, over the next few years. Purely because the Norochcholai power plant was not allowed to be built.

There will be many regrets. Religious organisation will regret that they did not do anything to drive some sense into person (s) conducting a meaningless but vicious campaign against the coal power project. Religious hierarchy will surely regret that they did not do anything to assist CEB to break the deadlock and build this vital project. World religious leaders will not intervene because they know the precise benefits of coal power. Because they know it. They use it, enjoy it.

They preferred to blackmail politicians than to discuss their concerns and negotiate matters with the technocrats. Engineers, Scientists, Economists, Administrators who all like to see this country prosper and who have a long-term vision for this country, were of no value to them. They blackmailed the politicians, whose vision runs only until the next elections, and say: if you do this, we will ask our people not to vote for you. Precise and adequate to bring politicians down

to their knees. To prevent them from making vital decisions. To force politicians to think of themselves, not the country.

Go solar, get wind, how about waves, and biogas, they said. As if there is any country in the world that runs their bulk electricity supply with these sources. The entire country want to learn electricity planning and economics. Perhaps, they should be taught.

They became instant experts in electrical engineering, coastal erosion, flue gas chemistry. For four long years, they made all the wild allegations. They first said there will be acid rain. Then they said there will be sea erosion and the church will be washed away. Some said the fish will die. There will also be cancer. Finally, when they could not support any of their arguments with scientific reasoning and calculations, now they turned to the only weapon, the timely use of the most powerful weapon which has no basis or sense: security. Strong enough to drive fear into anybody's mind.

This latest reasoning reflects precisely what anti-national elements want us to do. Just do nothing, fearing there will be bombs. Stay home, do not work, close the factories, stop economic development, do not build power plants, because there may be bombs: precisely what they expect us to do.

They say Norochcholai will be bombed, as if more secure places have not been bombed. They ridicule our security forces that they could not protect our President. Even without visiting a power plant, they ridicule our engineers, excellent technologists and workers that they cannot maintain power plants. Always underestimate our people and their skills, and enjoy talking about it. Even make statements. They ridicule our environmental laws and the judicial system. To say that they are worthless.

You electricity consumers! Understand the economic damage done by the person (s) blocking the coal power project. Any other method of generating electricity is at least Rs. 1.00 more expensive per unit of electricity, than coal. The coal power plant will generate 20 million units of electricity per day. For each day the project remains blocked, our economy loses Rs. 20 x 1.00 — 20 million rupees. Their vicious campaign has already caused the project to be delayed by more than 400 days: the economy has already lost Rs. 8000 million.

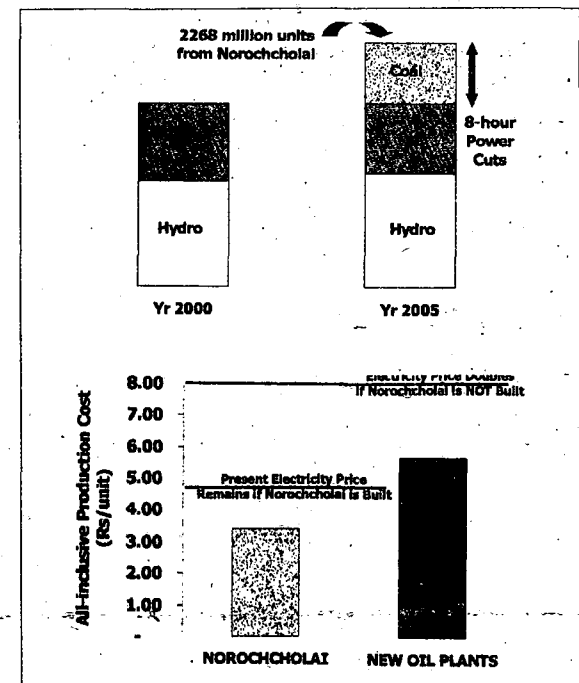
Get your figures right. If the Government has 8000 million rupees extra, they can buy 4000 new buses. Any other options to spend 8000 million rupees?

Provide new water supplies to 800 towns/villages. This is the magnitude of the loss: This is the magnitude of our national tragedy. Our inability to make decisions.

You electricity consumers! Who will pay this extra cost? Of course you, Your Excellencies and Your Lordships. You, your household, your industry, your shop, your temple, your embassy and your church, too. How? By way of increased electricity bills.

Anybody who can negotiate and release the deadlock deserves a heavy prize. For if you can release the lock on Norochcholai not tomorrow but today, the country saves Rs 20 million. If you can release the block not this evening but this morning itself, the country saves half that Rs. 10 million.

Rs. 8000 million lost already. And the loss is increasing at 20 million rupees a day. When your electricity bills increase, blame the Government: Easy. Have a go at the CEB: Most enjoyable. Support those who block the project: Most satisfying. Pay double your electricity bills: Difficult. Stay for hours in darkness in year 2004 and thereafter, and say cheers to the vicious campaigners.



(The writer is a former Chief Engineer Planning, Ceylon Electricity Board)