

The truth about the coal plant: A reply to LNG lobby

News_COP_2000-23.pdf

By W. J. L. S. Fernando

We write this in response to Dr. Janaka Ratnasiri's article 'Coal Power Plant will not Avert a Power Crisis in 2004' in The Island on 12, 13, and 14 April 2000. In his article the author has commented on various issues related to the proposed Coal Power Plant (CPP) at Norochcholai. The article contains a large number of inaccuracies and misconceptions. For the benefit of the readers, Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) wishes to clarify the accurate position on all the inaccuracies and misconception in Dr. Ratnasiri's letter.

Environmental Clearance for Norochcholai

Dr. Ratnasiri alleges that the Coast Conservation Department (CCD) had not granted approval for the CPP, which is totally incorrect. CCD has given their consent after carefully studying the probable coastal impacts arising out of the construction of the CPP and its coal unloading facilities. Of course, this clearance is subject to certain conditions that need to be fulfilled by the CEB as the Project Proponent, who has to abide by these conditions prior to the commencement of construction. The St. Annes shrine in Talawila will not be affected at all, and it has to be noted that the CCD will not permit any activity that endangers the coastal stability in any way, not to mention the special case when a religious place of worship dear to so many is involved.

Dr. R. has tried to raise the fact that the Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) approval for the CPP has been only granted by Central Environmental Authority (CEA), and North Western Provincial Council (NWPC), subject to certain specific terms and conditions and that these have not been made public. Being once a responsible official and a Consultant to the Ministry of Environment, Dr. R. should know well that project approvals are usually granted subject to certain conditions imposed by the Project Approving Agency or Agencies (PAA). There is no practice of making them public since these conditions are meant for the Project Proponent. Dr. R. should also be aware that Project Approving Agencies look into the public concerns and some of the conditions imposed are to address these concerns.

Emission Control

Dr. R. then goes on to express his concerns about the design and working of the Electrostatic Precipitators (ESPs) proposed to be fitted to the CPP to remove particles from the exhaust. He says that

ESPs are not suitable for coals with low sulphur and that the stipulated minimum 99.3% collecting efficiency will not be achieved. He further goes on to add that bag house filters are more appropriate for the project. CEB wants to assure the public that the sulphur content of coal has been given due recognition in designing the ESPs, and their size and layout are engineered to suit low sulphur coal. Dr. R. says we cannot believe Dr. Tilak Siyambalapitiya as an individual with regard to the removal efficiency of 99.3%. However, the experts who are specialised in these subjects and who studied the EIA accepted and who studied the EIA reaffirmed the satisfactory working of ESPs this figure while reviewing the EIA and would

Government Officer should know better that bids for projects of this nature are only invited from pre-qualified tenderers, whose technical competence is established prior to inviting detailed bids. Further, any bid failing to comply with the technical specifications is bound for outright rejection. The very need for outlining the technical specifications is to ensure that low grade equipment is not procured. CEB is inclined to believe that either Dr. R. is ignorant of this well established procedure even after working in the public sector for a considerable period of time or he is willfully trying to mislead the public and cast aspersions on the technical competence of the CEB and the good judgement of the decision makers.

CEB assures the public that adequate measures will be taken at the proposed CPP to control the coal dust. These include spraying the stockpiles with water, compacting the piles and employing de-dusting equipment during coal handling operations. Conveyor belts bringing coal unloaded from the ships to the coal stockpiles will be completely enclosed.

Dr. R. say we cannot rely on them too, and believe him instead? ESPs operating under similar conditions are installed and operated all over the world. These are standard equipment in modern coal plants. As such, there is no reason at all to doubt their effectiveness. Bag house filters were also studied during the feasibility study, as an alternative. Owing to higher maintenance required and various other techno-economic considerations, ESP was found to be the more suitable option while complying fully and it with is capable of satisfying the proposed Sri Lankan standards for emission and air quality. It has to be noted that apart from some plants in Australia, most modern coal power plants around the world use ESPs for the removal of ash. It would be better if educated people like Dr. Ratnasiri restrict themselves to making comments only on subjects that they have specialised in and that they know best.

Government Procurement Procedures

Dr. R. alleges that under government purchase procedures, CEB will purchase the cheapest plant and not the best. This gives the reader the wrong impression that CEB would overlook quality and procure cheap sub-standard equipment. Dr. R. with his decades of experience as a

Coal Dust

CEB assures the public that adequate measures will be taken at the proposed CPP to control the coal dust. These include spraying the stockpiles with water, compacting the piles and employing de-dusting equipment during coal handling operations. Conveyor belts bringing coal unloaded from the ships to the coal stockpiles will be completely enclosed. As a further step, planting of trees around the perimeter is proposed in addition to all

these measures primarily to serve as a wind break and also to serve as a green belt pleasant to the eye. It is sad to note that Dr. R. is trying to mislead the public by saying that CEB is depending on trees to stop the coal dust from spreading. He also says that one trade delegation from UK has mentioned all operations like transport, storage and feeding of coal are carried out totally enclosed in their power plants, and the proposed CPP does not plan such operation.

This only shows his total lack of understanding of the design of the proposed CPP. As mentioned above, the entire 4 km long conveyor belt bringing in coal from ships to the coal stockyard will be fully covered. If Dr. R. took a fraction of the time and effort he spends in writing lengthy newspaper articles to read the relevant chapter in the EIA report for the CPP (which is a public document), he would not have made all these false allegations. We could name a number of coal power plants which do not have trees planted around the perimeter to block coal dust and are, located very close to population centers and where people live normal lives without any dust problem.

The Choice of Site

Dr. R. then embroils himself and the reader in the suitability of the project site. It is the position of CEB that Negombo cannot be considered for the CPP, owing to the simple reason that it is a heavily populated area. At the proposed site in Norochcholai, only forty two (42) families living on State Land with or without permission, need to be relocated. CEB has already earmarked land to resettle them, and they will all receive a newly-built two-roomed permanent house, their own land of 2 acres, and financial assistance to develop and make their new land agriculturally productive.

Continued tomorrow