

Electricity planners cannot wash their hands off power cuts

The letter written by Dr. Thilak Siyambalapitiya, former Chief Planning Engineer, Ceylon Electricity Board appeared in the Opinion Page of the *The Island* dated 1st July 1999 is trying to divert public anger on future power cuts to the environmental groups, washing the hands off the electricity planners and the politicians. We remember that there were so many politically organised marches against the CEB during their strike in 1996 and the consequent power cuts and perhaps he is trying to direct those marches against the people who fight for the public rights and environment.

The two examples he has cited are Upper Kotmale Hydropower Project and the Coal Power Plant at Puttalam and the reasons given by the writer is misleading and incomplete. Perhaps he missed certain parts of the story during his stay abroad. Therefore as the Foundation on Environment which he refers to in his letter, we should enlighten the readers that they should march if there are power cuts in the future.

Upper Kotmale Project was twice rejected by the Central Environmental Authority (in 1995 and 1997) and the regulating body due to the nonfeasibility of the environmental impacts. It was again rejected by the Secretary to the Ministry of Environment after hearing the appeal of the CEB in 1996 with due hearing to public and the experts. On these three occasions, more than 50 experts who serve in the Universities and the Government Departments participated in the committees appointed by the CEA and the Secretary to the Ministry of Environment.

Even if they approve the project with all the impacts, it will be only 150 MW Run of

River Power Plant which cannot operate in the drought situation. How can this help reduce the power cuts at present?. If we are to be blamed, the state authorities who rejected the appeal also should be blamed for giving the unbiased, environmentally sound and socially acceptable decisions against the Upper Kotmale Project.

Further the Central Engineering Consultancy Bureau (CECB) should also be blamed for giving environmentally and socially sound project alternatives which will not destroy St. Clair major, minor and Devon waterfalls and which will not reduce water for Ramboda, Puna, Pundel waterfalls.

However, we should thank the present Secretary to the Ministry of Environment for his bias approval for the environmentally and socially unsound UKHP project due to the political pressure and the pressure of the CEB, without hearing the public opinion.

Further we should blame all the people who fight for the rights of the born and unborn generation for their rights to the natural resources.

Also we should thank the politicians for putting unnecessary pressure on the public by suspending the environmental laws under the emergency regulations in 1997 to support polluting power plants.

During future power cuts we should not forget to thank the electricity planners who planned UKHP project without considering the environmental and social implications of the country and the rights of the present and future generations to the natural resources to create this mess, for over estimating the energy demand, for not doing anything to reduce

the transmission loss, for not designing renewable power project for the country, for personal advantages from the construction companies for violating the environmental law when commissioning power projects, for not advocating the country to build energy saving buildings, for not developing energy saving practices, for discouraging the investors who want renewable power plants, and the electric engineers who messed the coal project by trying to act as public relation officers etc.

Also do not forget to thank the politicians for bringing the coal power project into the list of political pledges creating unnecessary situations, police for killing a man during the protest, project designers for putting high polluting technologies, changing the site from Mundal to Norochcholai.

Also thank the NWPC and the CCD for taking the role of regulating the project without having the capacity, expertise, or legal mandate over the whole project. Also do not forget to thank the person who approved the project after visiting Malaysia using the funds of the developer and the person who approved the project without any public hearing and for not giving any consideration to the public opinion. Also do not forget to blame the president for assuring the Bishop of Chilaw that the Norochcholai coal power project will not be implemented.

Now you know how your anger should be used during future power cuts. You can now decide whether the electricity planners can wash their hands over this.

Hemantha Withanage
Environmental Scientist