

Power to the people of Norochcholai

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COAL FIRED POWER: The government had taken the bold step of constructing the Norochcholai Coal Fired Power Plant in the national interest, says Power and Energy Minister John Senevirathne.

Addressing the media after inspecting the site of the construction at Daluwa area close to Norochcholai, the Minister further argued that "the Government could have given into petty political gains" but it had a larger perspective about the impending power crisis.

The Minister expressed his satisfaction over the progress.

"I am impressed by the progress so far. We have 80 houses in both Block 1 and Block 2 nearing completion. Hopefully, we could be able to hand over the houses in early January to the families who had lost their lands due to the acquisition of lands for the construction of the Power Plant."

The construction of the broad access road to the site had been already started. The 60 feet wide and 18 km long road from Palaviya junction to the site would cost at Rs. 936 million. A permanent Police station had been established at the site for the protection of the proposed power plant.

The Minister said President Mahinda Rajapaksa took the bold step without giving into petty political considerations and gains realising the urgent need for new power plants.

"During the past decade not a single large scale power generation project was set up to cope with the annual increase in the demand for electricity. This situation had put the CEB into trouble."

"As soon as resettlement is over, the 200 acre land will be available for the construction of the power plant," Minister Senevirathne told media. The Minister also inspected the project office of the Chinese construction company in Puttalam.

Housing scheme

Furnished houses with electricity and pipe borne water will be handed over to the families by the end of December, the Minister said. Houses were being constructed to be handed over to the families who had lived prior to the acquisition in the proposed site for the Coal-Fired Power Plant, and had engaged in fishing and cultivation.

Minister Senevirathne said that each house was built in a 20 perch extent of land. "Every housing unit is built in an extent of three perches so that the rest could be used as a home garden."

Another two acre land each will be allocated to each family for their livelihood. The CEB would develop the infrastructure including the road network to the scheme and Daluwa village would be developed into a new township," he said.

When queried about accusations of the CEB unions that certain CEB officials were deliberately delaying the construction of the project the Minister refuted the charges levelled at the CEB but attributed the delay to the late signing of the loan agreement.

"The delay has nothing to do with the CEB but it was due to the delay in the signing of the loan agreement. We hoped to sign it as early as possible. But as the project was very large and involved millions of US dollars it needed serious considerations on the part of the lender; therefore it took some time.

We signed the MoU with the China National Machinery Corporation, a state owned company." The Minister said that the compensation would be granted through the Land Acquisition and Resettlement Committee (LARC). The LARC had several meetings and would meet regularly in the future. Compensation would be awarded on the basis of LARC recommendations, he said.

Windfall

"This is a windfall" referring to the new houses being built, a local correspondent of national daily newspaper said. "because the 80 families live in the thatched houses, sans sanitation, ventilation, this is a windfall," she enthused. "These families had come from remote areas like Trincomalee and Mannar and engaged themselves in cultivation, fishing and as labourers in vegetable and coconut cultivations."

Compensation

Although it had been such a windfall for the poor families the owners of larger extent of lands within the reserved site were concerned whether they would be adequately compensated, she said. "These people who owned lands ranging from a few acres to some dozens are living outside and did not have houses located inside acquired land. As a result they were not entitled to own any houses in the scheme. The larger land owners are worried about the compensation they would get in return of their fertile land."

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"The LARC would adequately compensate those who lost larger extent of land due to the acquisition," T.M. Herath Additional Secretary to the Ministry explained.

According to a LARC member and the Project Civil Engineer Wijerathne, the LARC had been tasked with granting fair compensation to permanent landowners who lost their land. The Committee would be chaired by the Divisional Secretary and representatives of the relevant parties; the land owners and the state.

Wijerathne said compensation would be calculated under the normal procedure by the Valuation Department and was done in terms of the certain model adopted by the Department but said that it would be below the market value and the LARC would step into fill this gap that existed between the replacement value i.e. that the difference between value of the cost of finding a similar land elsewhere and the value arrived at by the Valuation Department. The LARC would finally arrive at a fair amount in discussion with such landowners.

However, he agreed that the compensation could be below the market value. "Although it is below the

market value, they can easily buy a similar land elsewhere with the amount of the compensation they receive. The market value of course had gone up sharply only after the project was contemplated. Before that time it was very much lower," he contended. "Therefore, no one would suffer merely by not being compensated in par with the market value," he reiterated.

He said that the compensation would be calculated from the date of the acquisition of the land also taking into the account of the economic loss and the loss of livelihood as well incurred by the parties.

The housing scheme was constructed at an estimated cost of Rs. 65 million. The cost to build a unit of house was around Rs.850,000. Each house has a floor area of approximately 540 sq feet with two rooms, living area, kitchen, and a lavatory. A 10 feet deep well had also been constructed. Wijerathne said although it has only 2-3 feet water one cannot easily empty a well even in the most dry period of the year.

Fresh Water

The beautiful western "wine dark sea" as Homer always referred to sea in his epics, is in the vicinity not even half a kilometre away from the housing scheme. But the real significance was not with the wine dark sea water but with the fresh water in the wells which was as good as water from any other fresh water source.

"The secret was in the availability

ty of fresh water in abundance very close to the surface," he disclosed. The potable water sans any distaste close to the surface and despite the proximity to the sea was what kept the people glued to the land.

"The land is all for them. That's why they do not want to leave the place. However the land we allocated to them is as good as that was acquired for the power plant."

The residents and environmental groups expressed concern and protested against the construction of coal fired power plant on the basis that it would bring acid rains, warm up the sea water close to the shore and pollute the environment.

But the CEB and the Power and Energy Ministry claimed that 99% of hazardous gases and fly ash emitted by the power plant would be collected and used for various purposes and the hot water would be cooled down within the plant before releasing to the sea.

The first phase of the country's first ever power plant would be completed by 2010 with power generating capacity of 300 MW while the second and the final phases would be completed by 2012. The project is funded under a Chinese credit facility.



Power and Energy Minister W.D.J. Senevirathne inspecting the construction site of the coal fired power plant at Norochcholai.



Houses for the displaced nearing completion at Daluwa close to Norochcholai



The Minister inspects the site plan with Chinese engineers.