

02nd June 2006 Daily mirror (A9P)

Norochcholai - the problem within the problem

By REID SHELTON FERNANDO

World Environment Day is celebrated every year on June 5, in order to emphasise the importance of environment in human life. For the year 2006 the theme set apart by the UN is the Desertification and deserts. The World Environment Day theme selected for 2006 is Deserts and Desertification and the slogan is Don't Desert Drylands! The slogan emphasizes the importance of protecting drylands, which cover more than 40% of the planet's surface. This ecosystem is home to one-third of the world's people who are more vulnerable members of society. According to the UN information the main international celebrations of the World Environment Day 2006 will be held in Algeria.

In Sri Lanka there are no deserts but the process of desertification is on through a process the humans deploy in the name of development. The process of deforestation is on the agenda when the unconcerned profiteers who cut the trees for logging. On account of the urgent need of power-generation due to the escalation of the petroleum products, the general consensus has been reached to have coal-fired power as the cheapest available. But the dangers that are inherent in this project had not been properly assessed by the stakeholders of this coal-fired power generation. It is entirely detrimental to the environment and it will make the Peninsula of Kalpitiya a desert within the next ten years.

Political options have varied from time to time. Several leaders while in power or in the opposition did give assurances to the people that this will not be built at Norochcholai. Is it that the leaders do forget the promises that they give to the people? Are the leaders dishonest? When the affected people had gone in for litigation to the judiciary, the case was withdrawn because of the assurances given by the State and quoting a Cabinet papers. If the cabinet decision is reversed then this fact should be informed and the original case will have to be revised. So the State is not faithful to the judicial process and disregard for the judicial process in the country.

It is stated by the engineers of the CEB that coal-power is the cheapest. The CEB did not cater to any other alternative other than coal-fired power. They campaigned only for coal. They did not bother even to inquire about other possibilities.

They did not have research conducted on the other possible alternatives. The coal-fired power may be cheaper when compared with diesel supply. This attitude of the CEB has created a suspicion among the opponents whether the CEB is after the commission that goes on normally with any development projects.

The Bishop of Chilaw Rt. Rev Dr. Frank Marcus Fernando campaigned against the implementation of this project, not merely to save the shrine of St. Anne's at Talawila on several grounds - the livelihood of the over 100,000 people of the peninsula who would be affected. The poor farmers and the fishermen would have to give up their habitation. Further it is not only the farmers and fishermen of the peninsula, that would be affected by it but people over 40-50 kms around in the mainland would have environmental and health problems due to the gas that emanates from this plant. The bishop also stated the security reasons for opposing this project. The protest by the Bishop is not merely on the religious grounds. It is unfortunate the stake holders have tried to discredit the opposition by the Bishop with mere flimsy reasons.

There is media disinformation by the stake-holders regarding the protests. They had stated that protestors are with the Diesel-lobbyists. It is not true at all.

Environmental issues -

It is learned that there is an EAI Report conducted by CEB whether done with or without the approval of the CEA Central Environmental Authority in 1999 which was conducted by a European Firm which has several flaws as shown by some local activists. Knowledgeable people have categorically stated that the report submitted by this concern has several statements that are untrue, while others are half-baked truths. That original project was mooted and designed for better coal from Australia and funds were promised by Japanese Aid Programme. This coal was expensive. Now the foundation was laid for a different set of machinery because the coal is imported from China. It is stated that the Chinese coal is dirty with a greater quantity of sulphur contained in them and creates a greater emission of sulphur gasses to the atmosphere. The 61,000 dollar question is whether the CEB has conducted a EIA report on the changes made to the original machinery.

It is also a prerogative on the



Residents protesting against the coal power project

part of the project holders i.e. CEB to make public such reports. It is also laid down in the Environmental law enacted in Sri Lanka, that such reports must be available to the public for their perusal and the people have a right to ascertain the good and the bad about such issues.

Regarding the project with Chinese aid and machinery -

It is an entirely different construction that was mooted with Australian coal. Even the half-baked environment reports cannot be applied to this new set up. Therefore, the EAI of the previous project cannot be applied in that instance and a fresh EIA has to be done which the CEB, the stakeholder, has not complied with so far.

According to the available reports to produce 300 MW of power 2640 metric tons of coal has to be used. Out of these 10% is evaporated to the atmosphere and further 10% will be the ash. The earlier plan was to use this ash to produce cement but now the cement company has declined the offer.

The details of the changes in the pattern of the new factory and other changes are not made public.

How the imported coal is to be transported to the site is not made known yet.

The original suggestion was to erect a jetty four km from the shore and to send the imported coal to the power plant through a conveyor belt. The engineers who have explored this possibility of erecting the jetty have expressed negative views and it is not a feasible option to carry out when they need daily 2640 metric tons. Then the other alternative is to

transport the coal from Trincomalee to the power plant at Norochcholai. The existing lines will not be able to comply with this provision of transporting coal from Trincomalee. It means that there has to be a new railway line to be built and which has not planned yet consequently no EIA report.

Once the power plant is operative according to the stakeholders in 2010, the generated power has to be linked up with the national grid. The suggestion is to link up with Veyangoda. It also means that the high-tension power lines will have to be constructed and no plans are made and it is going to be further environmental catastrophe affecting the economy of the NWP and WP.

Falsification in the media

The State and private media are used by the State and the project holder CEB to carry on a vilification campaign. The facts and figures given are not entirely correct. The advertisements in the print and electronic media carry on a campaign with half-baked truths. On a particular Friday, the Police organized a campaign after the Mosque prayers at Norochcholai. The police supplied the posters and banners and forced people to carry them around. Then the media reported that the people of the area are in sympathy and that they are asking questions as to the delay.

There was another story of how the Kalpitiya police took a parcel of drugs in a bus. The Police had followed the bus from Kalpitiya and impounded the parcel. There was no one responsible for this parcel of drug. Then the news papers

at Norochcholai, this is also to give support to the Minister's constant barrage that those who oppose this project are involved in drug dealing and are linked to smugglers. He even said that the Bishop and the priests in the area have become stooges of these anti-social elements. Therefore, the Officials of the police are also responsible for this false campaign.

Regarding Media blitz, on the day the foundation stone was laid (11th May 2006), there were several newspaper features and full-page advertisements from the CEB. In one of the pictures there was a photograph from the Talawila mission house, where the Priest-administrator and another priest were featured with the Minister of Power and Energy.

This was placed merely to show that the religious leaders have given their blessing to this project. One news paper carried news previously that the Bishop of Chilaw approved the project. And later the Bishop of Chilaw had to clarify the issue stating that he never met the Minister.

Commissions and transparency

It is common knowledge that every project has commissions given to the interested groups and signatories. I think that this is an accepted practice all over the world. Some

commissions for the welfare of the people. It is common knowledge that a particular chairman of a state-run board, brought vehicles from these commissions. But what happens is that the officials and the leaders who receive such commissions do accrue them in foreign banks. In this project who are the recipients of such commissions? The financial transactions must become public knowledge.

Alternatives

It is unfortunate that the State and the Stake holders haven't taken note of alternatives to the Coal-fired power. Even the recent articles in various international magazines prove that renewable energy is cheaper and is environmentally friendly. There are several possibilities such as wind-power, solar power, natural gas and dendro-power. Some of these alternatives are cheaper and quicker.

There are enough experiments carried out all over the world. There is an interested group of academics, scientists, engineers, environmentalists and activists who are ready involved in showing practically how these alternatives are better options than the coal-fired power. It is unfortunate the services of these experts have been disregarded by the CEB, the Ministry and by the Leaders.

This expert group had published a brief paper and was sent to the media and it is to be published yet. I take this opportunity to highlight some of their opinions to show that there are better alternatives.

"In any event, we are concerned that these are, apart from the proposed generation of 100MW of electrical energy using fuel wood, the only visible plans for the energy sector. They are directly in contradiction with the declared policies of recognising that energy is a much wider subject than elec-

tricity, enhancing energy security and energy sovereignty, concern for the environment etc.

The Government has already accepted in principle a role for Dendro power for electricity generation. This is to be commended. Bio-fuels for transportation is another that needs to be factored into any plan for energy sustainability. There are other sources that should be considered, including some with a shorter time span for implementation than coal. Wind energy for electricity generation is one such. One estimate of the total on-shore wind energy potential in Sri Lanka is a high 24,000 MW! We need to have an active R & D programme for the development of local capacity in wind turbine design and construction. Solar thermal and solar photovoltaic for specific applications are other options.

If the Government is keen to have a fossil fuel based option to meet base electricity demand for the short term, we strongly suggest that Natural Gas too be considered as an option. There is one other option that needs to be pursued before any fossil fuel based generation is considered, even as a stop-gap measure. It is estimated that a considerable amount of electrical energy (equivalent to a substantial installed capacity) may be saved by energy conservation, especially in the hospitality industry. A case study is presented on the Singapore govt. web site on the Grand Hyatt hotel retrofit. It is being used as a case study and good example of what has been done. The capital required is reasonable, and the pay-back period is very short. If the Government co-ordinates this activity as major project, it will qualify for carbon credit, and even the modest investment required may be forthcoming through the CDM scheme".

Proposals -

- Let the CEB and the politicians do review this project even though the foundation stone is laid. There are several projects that have not gone beyond the foundation stone.
- Let there be a public hearing and let everyone consider this issue beyond party affiliations and think of the future of the country in an environmental-friendly manner. I place some of these proposals from the expert group
- Immediately institute a major energy saving strategy as a means of overcoming the immediate problems of the electricity industry, which could outdo 300-900 megawatts
- We propose that the energy policy as enunciated by the Government be given more credence by a commitment to move towards a totally renewable energy scenario by a defined date"
- Declare the intention of totally phasing out all non-renewable sources of energy within (say) twenty-five years. Review all other fossil fuel based projects, with a view to making them compatible with phasing out fossil fuels in twenty-five years) No subsidies of any sort be given to fossil fuels, instead any subsidies that may be available should be directed to renewable.
- Use a multi-criterion approach to project evaluation.