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Hydro & coal power–the other side

With reference to the letter 'Upper Kotmale: Water and cost factor' by N.R. Samaranayake (August 11) there are certain points which should be considered when planning water resources projects. I would like to clear certain misconception.

All power projects named hydro and coal are not cheap although they are said to be cheap.

Sri Lanka has wet and dry seasons. As such in hydro power development it is essential to have reservoirs to save water in the wet season, to meet the needs in the dry season.

In Sri Lanka, hydro-power projects are being planned without reservoirs, spending colossal amounts of money, to obtain a little power. The Upper Kotmale and Kukule hydro power projects are examples. Energy from these projects which are run-of-the-river power plants, is only about half of what can be obtained had they been provided reservoirs.

The Kukule Ganga project without the reservoir is not only ineffective in dry weather, but has also prevented the diversion of water to Ruhuna - which is in need of this resource badly for agriculture.

Now we have a plant which will provide little power, discharging the precious water to the sea.

Meanwhile, in the original plan for the Upper Kotmale project, proposed by UNDP and later by me, on which the feasibility study was taken up, the very important Caledonia reservoir was an integral part. Now this vital reservoir has been removed and instead all the beautiful waterfalls are to be tapped. In the original plans only St. Clair's would have been affected and the others not touched. Without the reservoir, the energy from this plant will be only one half of what can be obtained.

With regard to a coal power plant, the most important task is to unload the imported coal here and Norachcholai is not a suitable site.

The only valid objection to Kukule Ganga and Upper Kotmale is the absence of reservoirs while for the coal power plant it is the problem of unloading coal shipments. All other objections are unfounded and baseless.

The electricity from these three power projects will never be cheap though that is what is said.

A recent Securities Exchange report has stated that the return on investment in Sri Lanka is the lowest in the region as a result of such ill-conceived projects.

With the money spent on one of these hydro power projects, a 300 MW coal power plant could be set up at Mawella.

Each of these run-of-the river hydro-power plants produces only about 250 million units of firm energy while a 300 MW coal plant at Mawella is capable of producing 1800 million units of solid firm baseload energy, absolutely essential for industrial development. This would be seven times the capability of the hydro plants.

Of course, coal has to be imported and we have to leave an allowance for that.

A 300 MW coal power plant at Mawella will be far more effective than Upper Kotmale, Kukule Ganga and Norachcholai put together.

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