

Coal power the only solution

Coal power is the only solution to the energy problem. We have perceived the rising risks of being too heavily dependent on hydropower for our energy needs, over the years. Alternative sources of power and energy have to be developed and it is some time since coal emerged as a suitable answer to these needs.

Hydropower generation is crucially dependent on seasonal rains and our experience with the latter has not proved encouraging. When rains in the catchment areas are not satisfactory, we are faced with a serious power crisis.

The environmental damage the country has suffered over the decades as a result of the ruthless denudation of our forest cover, further underscores the grave risks involved in looking to hydropower as our foremost source of energy.

Besides, the hydropower reservoirs have been experiencing heavy silting - once again, on account of environmental damage. The clogging of these reservoirs has also affected our power-generation capability.

Thermal energy too has to be discounted as a reliable source of power on account of the volatile fuel prices. As President Kumaratunga herself pointed out, the recent fuel price hikes cannot be avoided on account of the continuing North-East war and fuel price spirals in the international market.

We are left with no choice but to look to coal power as a viable energy source. As The Ceylon Electricity Board Clerical and Allied Services Trade Union Front has quite correctly pointed out, not only is coal economically viable it is also the safest source of energy from the environmental point of view. In fact our giant neighbour India with its more than a billion population relies heavily for its power requirements on coal, with no reported environment damage. What, then, is preventing Sri Lanka from using coal power?

Our minds are taken back at this juncture to the stalled Norochcholai coal power project. The agitation which was conducted against the project pointed to the possible social consequences of the scheme. There are also reports that some unlawful elements, such as smugglers, were involved in the Norochcholai protests.

There is no alternative, than, to looking closely at coal as an alternative energy source. It could point the way out of our power dilemmas.

According to reports, it is estimated that fuel deposits are going to last about 40-50 years into the future considering the rate of discovering new deposits and increased rate of worldwide consumption of petrol.

Natural gas supplies in the world are going to last about the same length of time as that of oil around 40 to 50 years according to these reports.

Compared to this, it is estimated that the coal deposits in the world are going to last at least another 200 years.

High oil prices have drastically affected the cost of electricity production in Sri Lanka since all its thermal generation plants are based on petroleum products. The present average price of electricity sales is less than the production costs of electricity from thermal plants, resulting in large revenue losses incurred by the CEB.

As for natural gas, only liquified natural gas can be used in Sri Lanka and the cost is prohibitive. LNF as a fuel option here is not at present feasible.

On the contrary coal prices are much lower than oil and tend to drop under increased demand.

Unlike oil, coal prices are going to be fairly stable for the next two decades. So coal it is and coal it must be!