

Lanka needs five coal power plants

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An "Energy Anxious Lankan (FAI)" has requested information (THE ISLAND 22nd March) about the coal power plant to be built at Norochcholai.

Is Norochcholai in Puttalam District the best site? Do we need only one coal power plant?

Over the next 30 years, the country needs about 5000 Megawatts of new generating capacity. By year 2030, our population is forecast to be about 22.5 million, and the per capita electricity consumption will be about 2000 kilowatt-hour (kWh). Presently we are at 400 kWh. This 2000 kWh is not a wild assumption. A Malaysian uses this amount of electricity today. So, the assumption, if you like to draw a comparison, is that Sri Lanka by 2030 will be equivalent to Malaysia now in year 2000 in terms of electricity needs.

Coal is the only proven technology for Lanka to generate such large amounts of electricity at the lowest possible cost. If at any time some other technology becomes technically and economically viable then we should switch. As of now this 5000 Megawatts have to be built in 5 coal-fired power plants.

The country has three sites to locate these 5 power plants; Trincomalee, Mawella and Puttalam. Whichever way we go, all these three sites have to be developed over the next 30 years. Trincomalee is on-hold because no financier is willing to lend to anybody for projects there. Mawella is on-hold because the Government of 1992 decided that Puttalam is the first

to be developed. Puttalam site, known as Norochcholai, is now ready for implementation first.

The designs are ready. The funds are ready, Environmental clearances are ready. As reported in the press, the Opposition is ready. Not to protest but to support the project. Until the meaningless protests end, and until the Government gathers sufficient strength to make bold but correct decisions, the country's electricity supply will wobble along, literally on standby generators.

POINT of VIEW

by Dr. Tilak Siyambalapitiya

Now to EAL's specific questions.

(1) Is there any doubt about the continuity of coal supplies?

Certainly not, Worldwide use of coal and shipments show no signs of decline. Even USA and Japan are still building new coal-fired power plants, mostly operating on imported coal. Proven, declared reserve of coal are available for 300 years more. The corresponding figure for petroleum fuel is 80 years. Certain coal mines in the UK had to be closed down owing to their high Sulphur content and excessive costs. UK now imports coal!

(2) Is Norochcholai safe?

Any power plant has to be protected, wherever it is located. Even if it located in the UK or USA protection has to be provided. In such relatively trouble-free countries power plants are heavily protected. I am sure the plant designers would have taken the usual precautions to include adequate safeguards to ensure continuous operation of the plant, if the supply of coal is interrupted by acts of God or by acts of man.

(3) Palk Straight deepening project

This is a subject to be studied by Ceylon Electricity Board with the assistance of the Ports Authority. As I reasoned out above, all the three sites should be developed over the next 30 years.

The much awaited Power Crisis has now arrived. Unlike the previous crises, this crisis has come to stay. Its effects will be seen in the coming months, by way of higher electricity bills.