

In support of the people of Norochcholai

Several Buddhists monks, Christian prelates and civic leaders on Thursday sent a petition to President Mahinda Rajapaksa urging him to reconsider the decision to go ahead with the Norochcholai Coal Power Project.

The petition signed by more than 50 civic and religious leaders outlined several reasons why the proposed project would not be good for the people of Norochcholai and for the country as a whole.

The petition sent by the Alliance for the Protection of National Resources and Human Rights says:

"Attempts to push through the construction of a coal-fired power plant at Norochcholai in the North Western Province, which had for years been successfully opposed by people of the area, are being intensified once again.

"The Government has announced that it will in the coming months be concluding an agreement with the Chinese Government to borrow several hundreds of millions of dollars to contract the Chinese Government-owned company, the National Machinery and Equipment Import and Export Corporation, to design and build the plant on behalf of the CEB.

"The proposal provoked strong protest in the late 1990s, leading to a commitment by the Government to abandon the project in 2000, on the basis of which a legal challenge in the Court of Appeal was withdrawn in 2001, as was the earlier offer of finance from the Japanese Government. It was opposed on various grounds and the concerns raised remain largely unanswered.

• It was opposed on

social grounds, due to the displacement of families and possible severe disruption of livelihoods, which depend heavily on fishing, salterns and the cultivation of vegetables, chillies, onions and a little paddy, with some commercial crops including tobacco and coconut, all of which could be affected.

• Environmental concerns were raised, with the emission of gases contributing to acid rain and global warming, waste buried on the site contaminating groundwater and seeping into the lagoon and sea, and heated water released into the sea driving away fish.

• It was attacked on the grounds of public health, with dust from the coal and emission of ash containing toxic and radioactive elements including mercury and being blown inland, with no guarantee that good quality coal would be used or that the mitigation measures proposed would work as anticipated. This was of particular concern because of people's experience with the nearby cement factory, which has caused respiratory problems.

• Opposition emerged on religious grounds, because of the threat of increased erosion of the coastline putting the nearby Talawila shrine at risk.

• It was questioned as to cost, because of the more complicated structures needing to be built to offload coal from ships that would have to remain some distance offshore due to shallow water, and the longer time it would take to construct these in the rough seas experienced for most of the year. The dependence on imported coal, although cheaper than oil,

was also questioned.

• The project was considered a security risk, with the likelihood of the army and navy imposing restrictions on movement and possibly declaring the area as a high security zone.

• Questions were raised as to why alternatives were rejected, including options such as increasing capacity at existing power plants or opting for other technologies such as dendro and small scale projects to serve local areas.

The CEB now faces financial problems and is looking for the quickest and easiest way of relieving pressure from the international agencies pressing for privatisation, so the Government is intending to reverse earlier decisions, even those taken in court, at the expense of the people, particularly the people of Norochcholai.

The loan will have to be paid back, with interest. The project will not lower the current high price of electricity to the consumer, nor will it solve the problems in the energy sector. There is no greater good. The people of Norochcholai will risk their health, livelihoods and environment. The only ones to gain will be those offering the loan.

The Alliance for the Protection of National Resources and Human Rights supports the people of Norochcholai in opposing this project and calls on the Government to consider more appropriate solutions to the problems of the energy sector.

We note with concern that surveying of private land has already commenced, even though details of the new project are not available to the public.



In the scorching heat residents of Norochcholai return home after work.

We reiterate the people's right to information and demand that all details, including the feasibility report be made public.

We believe that a new Environmental Impact Assessment is imperative, as ground conditions would have changed over the years.

The petition has been signed by - Ven. Hanchapola Seelawansa Thera, Ven. Badullagammana Sumanasara Thera, Ven. Baddegama Samitha Thera, Ven. Buddiayagama Chandrarathana Thera,

Rt. Rev. Dr. Frank Marcus Fernando - Bishop of

Chilaw, Mawlavi Abdul Azeez, Rev. Fr. Werman Anthony, Rev. Fr. Sarath Iddamalgoda, Rev. Fr. Riddell Shilton Fernando, Rev. Fr. Lawrence Ananda, Rev. Fr. Sunil Wijesinghe, Rev. Fr. Norbert Devendra, Rev. Fr. M. Sathayavel, Rev. Sr. Janet, Rev. Sr. Christine Terence Purasinghe - Lecturer, Prof. H. Sriyananda, Dr. Lionel Weerakoon, Dr. Vickramabahu Karunaratna, Dr. Gamini Kulathunga, D. L. O. Mendis, All Religious Unity for the Protection of Norochcholai, Government Service Committee for the Increase of Salaries, Trade Union Centre for

the Right to Rebuild the Country, Alliance for the protection of National Resources and Human Rights, People to People to Dialogue for Peace and Sustainable Development, Railway Employees' Joint Front, Sri Lanka Janaraja Health Service Union, United Federation of Labour, Medical Research Technology and Scientists Association, Media Employees' Trade Union Federation, Government United Federation of Labour, Local Government Clerical Services Union, Government Factory Employees Union, Free Trade Zone General Workers' Union,

Progress Union, Commercial and Industrial Workers' Union, Government Print Workers' Union, Cooperators, Co-operatives and Mercantile Workers' Union, Ceylon Teachers' Union, Lake House Employees' Union, Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform, National Fisheries Solidarity, Movement for the Protection of Indigenous Seeds, National Peasant Congress, Savisthri Womens' Organization, Peoples' Education Centre, Kantaha Shakthi, Sramabhimanani Centre, Christian Workers Fellowship, Young Christian Workers

Movement, All Ceylon Fisher Peoples' Trade Union, United Fishers and Fish Workers' Union, Janavaboda Kendraya, Manawa Himicam Piyasa, Peasant Information Centre, Satyodaya, Devasarana Development Centre, Social Economic Development Centre, Movement for the Protection Democratic Rights, SETIK - Kandy, Human Development Organization, Independent Cooperative Unity, Arunodaya Environmentalists, Organization Against the Colombo Kandy Super High Way, Leo Marga Ashram, Plantation Social Forum.