Facts on Norochcholai coal power project

by G. A. D. Sirimal
Former Asst. Secretary
Ministry of Power and Energy Boralessamunuwa

Several letters and articles from eminent Consultants and Advisors appeared in the newspapers and during seminars, discussions over the TV it has been possible to state the following facts for the information of the public:

The project has been well studied by local and foreign consultants and two main objections were raised by the Bishop of Chillaw Rt. Rev. Dr. Frank Marcus Fernando on security to the Shrine at Talawila, about 13 km away north of Norochcholai and followed with environment and even touching on the engineering aspect. Mr. Carlo Fernando a Civil Engineer raised objection on provision of a 4.2 km jetty. All these objections were studied by an independent Consultant Mr. Rumball from Denmark selected with the approval of the Bishop of Chillaw, who cooperated by assigning two Catholic priests to look after the interest of the church - specially the St. Anne's Church at Talawila. Others critical were also interviewed. The underlying secret then emerged - the shrine at Talawila.

Mr. Rumball after meeting all those who were critical of the project submitted their final report, with a copy to the Bishop, dispelling all fears of the church and recommending a transhipment barge transfer with a harbour jetty, which, it is understood is acceptable to the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB). Special mention has been made regarding Talawila Church where the consultants make mention of sea erosion and concludes "Consultants agree that erosion caused by the jetty will not reach the St. Anne's Church."

Also it states "Based on experience from a range of power plant projects in various countries is that the project as designed will be able to operate without causing significant disturbance and nuisance to the nearby population. "Please bear in mind that the coal plant at Norochcholai is about 13 km south of St. Anne's Church Talawila. What more assurance does the Bishop or the Government want?"

There is a rumour spread by those critical of the project that the Japanese Consultants have rejected the project. In this regard it is very essential to quote a direct statement made by the Chief Representative of the Japanese Bank for International Cooperation (JIBC) Niomi Miwa, in the Sunday Observer of 14th October, 2001 - reveals that the Government has not made a formal request from the Japanese Government to set up a coal power plant project although they had carried out a feasibility study in March last year. If request is made we will review the position and decide to assist the new proposals from Sri Lankan Government. Miwa pointed out that if Sri Lanka began the project in 1999 when it was initially proposed it would have been producing a capacity of around 900 MW to the National Grid at present. Yet if there is any idea of shifting the project to some other area the feasibility study should be done again which will take another two years and additional heavy cost.

The feasibility study of the project had cost around nine million US dollars (976 Yen) and was completed in March 2000. Three units of 300 MW each were proposed and the loan agreement, which was 500 million US dollars, was signed in July 1994. It will be seen from the above statement of Mr. Naomi Miwa, that already there is an agreement signed in July 1994 for 500 million dollars and only 9 million US dollars have been spent on the feasibility study.

Speaking of hydro power the Prime Minister in his policy statement said, "I would like to state it is our aim to free the country from being a 'prisoner of nature' by ensuring a continuous power generation.

Having said that we should not be 'prisoners of nature', the Minister of Power and Energy, rushes through a Cabinet paper seeking Cabinet approval for a hydro plant at Kotmale and also the Finance Ministry quick to meet Japanese officials to fund this project.

Finally, now that all hurdles are cleared, where even the Bishop of Chillaw, Rt. Rev. Dr. Frank Marcus Fernando in one of his letters has said "It is up to the Government, why not take the bull by the horns."

Is a 150 mw. hydro power plant which could go dry during the dry season as we experience today, better than a 3 x 300 mw. coal plant which will give us an uninterrupted supply and construction period will be the same or less in the case of the coal plant at Norochcholai?"