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Coal ash begun blowing over farm lands in Norochholei

Photos by Bandula Babaranda and Hiran Jayasinghe

Despite the charges on corruption, high cost and obsolete technology, coal ash comes from the Norochcholai coal power plant has already begun destroying the farm lands in Illanthadiya area. As witnessed by the Sri Lanka Environmental Congress(SLEC) team, fly ash as well as the bottom ash with fine particles are spreading over the farm lands during the wind blowing, making poor farmers suffer from health impacts and livelihood losses.

The article written by Hemantha Withanage appeared on the Sunday Observer on 3rd October 2004 highlighted that according to engineering analysis, using 2640 tons of coal a day would result in nearly 180 tons of fly ash and 40 tons of bottom ash daily which will be major environmental problems.

The dirty coal supporters said that the ash will be selling to the Puttalam cement plant for making cement. However, no more than 30% of the coal ash can be sold for the production of cement. Rest is dumped in the backyard of the coal power plant with no covering is responsible for

the current dust emission.

It was also cautioned that dumping of ash is a major activity in this power plant where the land is very fertile, but the fresh water layer only about 5 feet deep. Removal of the dunes to raise the ground level of the plant will affect agricultural activity due to the depletion of fresh water. Proving this fact, people already complaining about the lowering of ground water level and the depleting water quality.

We also cautioned that the cooling water drawn from the sea at an average temperature of 28 Degrees Fahrenheit will be discharged back to the sea at a higher temperature of 35 Degrees Fahrenheit and at the rate of 45 cubic meter per second when 3x300 MW plants are in operation. This would mean that millions of gallons will be sucked in and returned to the sea at a higher temperature chasing the marine life away while harming the breeding.

Fishermen are already facing less fish catch in the area. They also complain that Naval forces don't allow them to catch fish during the unloading of coal. Although fishermen has suggested no coal unloading during the fishing time of the day, it was not accepted by the authorities. Nearly 5000 families engaged in the fishing industry will be deprived of their livelihood.

The Ceylon Electricity Board(CEB) ignored the public opinion during the EIA stage. The North Western Provincial Environmental Authority(NWPEA) which has no technical or human capacity approved the project ignoring the public opinion. They keep silent on the current environmental and health issues. In this situation we question the accountability of the CEB as well as the NWPEA. It is clear that the CEB does not follow the environmental standards and the Environmental management plan if any. While setting a dirty coal power plant at the backyard of poor farming communities in Norochcholai is an environmental injustice, continuous violation of the fundamental rights of the people living in the surrounding of the coal power plant is a serious rights violation by the CEB.

Although the North Western Province has own environmental Statute, we believe that the Central Environmental Authority should intervene in this issue. We believe that lack of capacity of the provincial agency cannot undermine the peoples fundamental rights established by the Constitution. Meanwhile, we also think that this is a good issue for the Chief Minister of the North Western Provincial council to intervene. Chief Minister is also responsible for the environmental portfolio of the NWPC. We therefore demand Chief Minister to resolve this issue soon.

The CEB which cannot deal with one power plant is proposing to generate 4700MW coal power capacity by 2032 by constructing 17 more dirty coal power plants. We therefore question the CEBs long term generation plan which will pollute 17 other locations in Sri Lanka.

We demand the Chief Minister of the North Western Provincial Council to resolve this issue as he is also responsible for the environmental portfolio in the province.



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