

## **We need three or four coal power plants - IESL president**

### ***Interview with B.R.O. Fernando President of the Institution of Engineers, Sri Lanka***

*by Douglas Ayling*

In the wake of uncertainty regarding the future of the Norochcholai power plant, and following the resignation of the CEB Chairman this week, the President of the Institution of Engineers and former CEB engineer Mr B.R.O. Fernando talks to the Daily News. He discusses integral problems with the provision of electricity for Sri Lanka, as well as his views on coal, environmentalism and the management of the CEB.

Q: What are your feelings about the involvement of the Catholic Bishop of Chilaw, Reverend Frank Marcus Fernando in the politics of the Norochcholai project?

A: As far as the bishop's involvement, the initial objection was that the fumes from the power station could damage St. Anne's Church, about 10 kilometres away, I believe. After all the feasibility reports were done, he requested that the government have an independent consultant to give their opinion on this power station; of which the government I believe got down some consultants from Denmark who were acceptable to the bishop and the government.

They did give a report, what they recommended was that if there was any objection to the conveyor belt, that you could have barges to transport the coal from mid-sea. And instead of having a big harbour to have a small jetty there.

So that is where things stand, and I really regret that the bishop should come into this picture to cast his opinion on some power project which is looked after by professionals. And not only that, but a power station which has to come up to serve the interests of the country, I believe.

Q: You have commented in the past that without coal-powered electricity generation, Sri Lanka's electricity prices will continue to rise and continue to be some of the highest in the world. What do you personally think should be done regarding Sri Lanka's future coal-powered electricity generation?

A: The actual thing is that the coal-fired power station was to be built in three phases going from 300 MW to 900 MW. It is not one site that we need, we need three or four sites. And I would estimate that by the year 2008, we should have a power station ready if we give the go-ahead today, and the second by about 2014, and the third by 2016. We have to think and look that far from now, and not wait until the crisis - as has happened today. The crisis which is now happening was forecast by our engineers in the 90s.

Q: With the question mark now hanging over the Norochcholai power plant, what are your feelings about this government's handling of the coal-fired power project?

A: Well, I would not say this government, all governments that have been in power since the 1980s have not given serious thought to the coal-fired power plant and the

present situation is due to this negligence. What is happening now is that we are going to have emergency plants, which is short-term, but costing money. It is the country, the community, which has to bear this brunt of increased prices, and the reason for it is the delay of the coal-fired power plant.

Q: Environmentalists have a strong influence in Sri Lanka. How do you see the conflict - between environmentalism and the need to produce more electricity - developing in the future?

A: I do believe that environmentalists can come in where there would be problems, but to put in a spoke at every point is not good for the country. To block a coal power plant which is a necessity for the country at the moment - and in the Ceylon Electricity Board's forecasts for the years to come - I feel it is not professional to put in blocks in this way.

Q: Do you believe that privatising the CEB would help to prevent the political and bureaucratic delays - of the scale we have seen with the coal power station project - from occurring again in the future?

A: When they started up LECO to be a private company still under the aegis of the CEB, they did very well because they did not have problems like the procedures we see in opening up tenders - things were running very quickly. They thought about it on their own, without the treasury or any government or public, putting in the spokes. So in that respect, privatising is good. But I do not know how far the government will accept the privatising of the generation aspect, because as you know, the hydro is our national heritage.

What I feel is this: that the CEB can be managed well, it was managed fairly well earlier. And according to the CEB Act, the General Manager of CEB is the Chief Executive of it and has full powers; but what I think is that for everything they have to go to the treasury for approval.

This is the bottom line. So if the CEB General Manager is allowed to work, on his own, things would not have happened as it is happening today... Even now, what I feel is that the CEB can manage if it is given that independence to go properly.