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INDIA: PEOPLE'S POWER VS. NUKE POWER

If Prime Minister Manmohan Singh wanted to insult the people agitating against the Koodankulam nuclear reactors at India's southern tip, he could have found no better way than agreeing to meet their delegation on October 7— only to have Department of Atomic Energy (DAE) Secretary Srikumar Banerjee lecture them on the virtues of nuclear power.

Praful Bidway - The meeting was held to respond to the grassroots demand for scrapping the project. The demand's moral force, expressed in a 12-day hunger strike by over 100 people, impelled the Tamil Nadu cabinet to ask that project construction be halted.

The delegates had to suffer Mr. Banerjee, who recently disgraced India's scientific community. Just as the Fukushima disaster turned nasty with the March 12-14 hydrogen explosions, he dismissed its gravity. He said the explosions — which indicated severe core damage and aggravated it — were "a purely chemical reaction, not a nuclear emergency!" Nothing could have been more delusional.

Dr. Singh promised to halt work on two Russian-made reactors at Koodankulam, but immediately went back on his word. The protestors started another fast and 10,000 people besieged the plant site.

The protestors shouldn't be treated like ignorant and misguided children to be coached and disciplined by a nanny state. Their leaders are well-informed professionals, including S.P. Udayakumar, who has taught at a US university, M. Pushparayan, a lawyer, and Tuticorin's Bishop.

Their case is compelling. The two 1,000 MW reactors under construction were never subjected to an Environment Impact Assessment. They were cleared by the environment ministry five years before the EIA process started — without considering the intrinsic hazards of nuclear reactors.

The reactors will daily draw in millions of liters of freshwater, and release it at a high temperature into the sea, affecting the fish catch on which lakhs of livelihoods depend. They are being built within a one-kilometer radius of major population-centres, violating the 1.6-km "nil-population" zone stipulation.

The reactors will routinely release effluents and emissions containing radioactivity, a poison you can't see, touch or smell. Scientific studies covering 136 nuclear sites in seven countries show abnormally high leukemia rates among children, and higher incidence of cancers, congenital deformities, and immunity and organ damage.

All nuclear activities produce wastes, which remain hazardous for thousands of years. Science hasn't yet found a safe way of storing wastes. Catastrophic accidents are possible in every nuclear reactor in the world, including a Chernobyl or Fukushima-style core meltdown. Twenty-five years on, 300,000 people cannot go back home

because of radioactive contamination around Chernobyl. The Fukushima disaster still hasn't ended, but the station operator is already paying out US\$50 billion in damages.

A reactor is a barely controlled nuclear bomb, where a runaway chain reaction is prevented by circulating water and some safety devices. But these can fail. Lack of cooling can produce a catastrophe as the fuel gets relentlessly heated. That's what happened at Fukushima. The reactors couldn't withstand the Magnitude 9 earthquake, belying the operator's claim. The tsunami knocked out the backup, precipitating a station blackout, causing a loss-of-coolant accident and meltdown.

A station blackout can occur because of any number of factors in any reactor, with unpredictable but uncontrollable consequences, including a meltdown.

PMANE activists understand this hazard. They probably know a lot more about the problems of Russian reactors than DAE bureaucrats who have failed to master nuclear technology.

Bellona, a Norwegian group has revealed a special report by Russian nuclear safety experts in June, which says Russian reactors are grievously under-prepared for disasters. (see Checks of Russian nuclear reactors fail safety hopes - and worse, leaked report reveals: bellona.org/articles/articles_2011/rosatom_report). These disclosures are damning. Rosatom chief Sergei Kiriyenko hasn't denied them, but merely claimed that more money would fix the flaws. The report contradicts the official Russian statement that a Fukushima-type meltdown could never happen in Russia.

The DAE makes identical claims about India — as baselessly. Confronted with an informed opposition, it has stooped to maligning the broad-based multi-religious PMANE as a Church-dominated group.

The DAE also sees "the foreign hand" behind the movement. This is a bit rich coming from a department whose very survival now depends on the "foreign hand": importing reactors from Russia, France and the US — without scrutiny.

Similarly, in Jaitapur in Maharashtra, the DAE is slinging mud at the opposition, while telling people "radiation is your friend." The French-designed European Pressurised Reactors to be installed there are as problem-ridden as and even more expensive than Koodankulam's VVERs.

It would be suicidal for India to build such nuclear projects. They will bankrupt the electricity sector and impose terrible health risks. There are perfectly sound, safe, cost-competitive renewable energy alternatives to nuclear power. That's where the future lies.

Source: Praful Bidwai is an eminent Indian columnist. Published on the South Asian Citizens Web on October 18, 2011: www.sacw.net

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