

Lessons from the blast in Beirut

Are we planting a bomb in the Colombo port ?

The world is shocked by the recent tremendous explosion in Lebanon claiming the lives of some 135 people and hundreds more grievously injured. In addition to the Billions of dollars' worth of property damage. This blast estimated to be as powerful as a Richter Scale 3.5 earth quake, has resulted in the total destruction of the Beirut harbor. This is reportedly the lifeline for the entire Lebanon, already battered by decades of strife. The immediate impact on maintaining the day to day needs for the life of the citizens as well as the long term impact by the loss of the harbor can only be conjectured.

We in Sri Lanka, perhaps due to the preoccupation with the general election, which no doubt has swept all other issues out of sight, have given scant attention to this tragedy. Perhaps the fact that only 8 Sri Lankans were directly affected by injuries did not warrant much attention of the media too.

But it is very important to realize that this tragedy has delivered a very important and timely message to us in Sri Lanka.

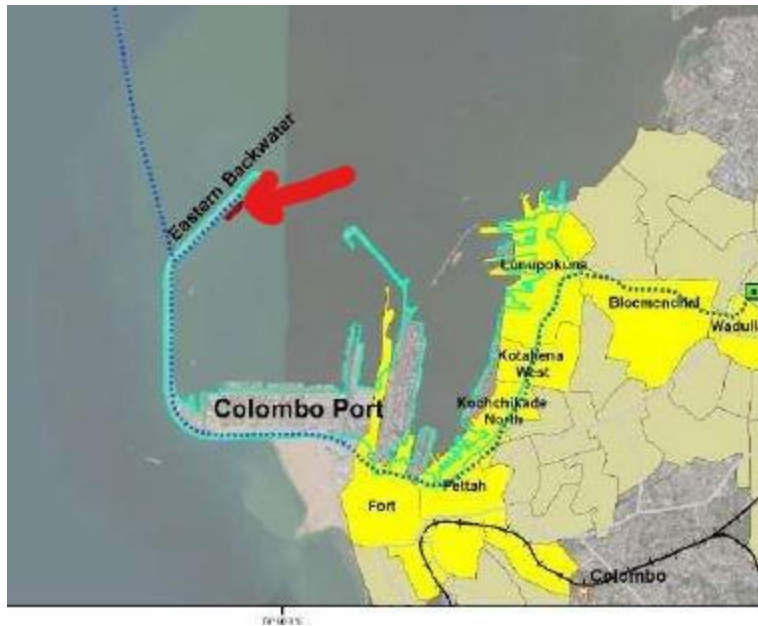
Needless to say, a commercial harbor is the epicenter of most economic activities being the gateway for all exports as well as for the essential imports. While we are fortunate to have the recently developed Hambantota Harbor and several smaller harbors the pivotal role played by the Colombo harbor in the above context cannot be denied.

Therefore the strategic importance of the Colombo harbor behooves us to ensure its safety at all costs, which must be paramount in planning any projects which could be of detrimental impact on this responsibility.

Under these circumstances, many of the Sri Lankans would not be aware of a most dangerous proposal that is on the cards, to use the Colombo harbor to anchor a Floating Storage and Regasification Unit (FSRU). This is the central facility required if we are to diversify the sources of energy for power generation, which the CEB has been touting for, ever since their attempts to expand the coal power generation was proven unviable by the PUCSL.

While the most dubious attempt to force an unsolicited proposals by a Korean Company SK with the blessings of the former president, with the same intent of siting the FSRU in the Colombo harbor seems to have been averted, a new project of similar nature is being promoted. Ostensibly several MOUs have been signed in 2018 to form a joint venture company consisting of Petronet LNG Limited, Sojitz Corporation, Mitsubishi Corporation, and Sri Lanka Gas Terminal Co Ltd to implement a Gas Infrastructure proposing Development Project.

The central facility of this project too would be a FSRU to be installed on the east side of the western breakwater of the Colombo harbor. Gas pipelines are to be led from the FSRU across the harbor to the Kelanitissa Power plant and to the Kerawalapitiya power complex where a new LNG power plant is to be built. These will run through the harbor premises and densely populated areas.



It is not clear as to how a project of such national importance has been given to a set of private sector companies, some of whom has no track record of ever managing an FSRU, without a proper tender procedure as called for by the Electricity Act. A call has been made already for public comments on an EIA report prepared by a Japanese Consulting Company selected by the developers. One would expect a major project of this nature with wide national implications should have been reviewed in depth with feasibility studies and an EIA being conducted by an independent consultant selected by the CEA with a well thought out Terms of Reference. The process of the developers selecting the company performing the EIA, always bring to the question their independence and objectivity as was clearly seen in the case of the Sampur Coal project, which was fortunately revealed in time.

The author and several other eminent professional submitted responses to this EIA highlighting glaring omissions of not considering feasible alternatives and particularly the proposal to set up the FSRU within the Colombo harbor. The most casual manner with which the potential hazards and safety issues have been addressed in the EIA were highlighted.

These have not even been acknowledged.

There are many other ways that the proposed LNG import facility can be implemented without such short sighted approach and many examples exists throughout the world. We are fortunate to have our own Sri Lankan experts in the field, who have submitted many reports

and presentations highlighting the need for care and possible ways of mitigating any risks which are inevitable.

With the present state of disarray in the energy sector, there are many other issues which need to be clarified.

Who has the responsibility for the supply of LNG to the power plant which we hope would be awarded soon for the 300 MW LNG power plant at Kerawalapitiya?

Will the supply be in place by the time the power plant is commissioned, which could be as short as two years? Or will we allow the plant to be built, but no firm and acceptable solution for the LNG supply be in place, so that the plant would be run on Diesel and for how long? Who will bear the extra cost?

What will be the price to be paid for LNG delivered to the power plant and variations over the years?

How many LNG plants will be erected?

What are the plans for monetizing our own gas resources in Mannar?

Does the plans for LNG infra structure permit the changeover to Mannar Gas on an equitable basis? And many more.

At a recent seminar conducted by the Sri Lanka Energy Managers Association, the Additional General Manager of the CEB, made a presentation on the CEB's plans for the LNG option, wherein an FSRU was proposed to be installed offshore at Kerawalapitiya. This is a far more acceptable solution than planting a potential bomb in the Colombo harbor as proposed. Are we planning to do ourselves what the LTTE and Prabhakaran was prevented from doing by causing irreparable damage to this most important economic facility?

The video evidence of the type of disaster that has occurred by gas explorations was displayed at the above seminar, highlighting this danger, by Eng. Nalin Gunasekera, a world renowned expert in the field of FSRU deployment over many decades. These can be viewed at

<https://youtu.be/UdEqC5oMdrI>

<https://youtu.be/47Xg3LoSBVE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUjPidithfc>

<https://twitter.com/i/status/1290672170826436610>

The first is on a gas plant in Mexico, which is what the FSRU amounts to and the second is on a pipeline in Taiwan. We are exposing Sri Lanka to both these. The third is on a gas platform in North Sea. The fourth is on the explosion in Beirut.

We would like the people of Sri Lanka to compare these photographs with those published in the media of the Disaster in Lebanon. Is there are any difference? The gas explosion could be even more devastating.



Gas Plant Explosion

Explosion of Ammonium Nitrate Store in Beirut

We have had a taste of the type of destruction that can be caused by such explosions in the Salawa ammunition store. But this is a mere fire cracker in comparison to a gas explosion.

Under these circumstances, a most dangerous project should not be allowed to proceed further to a point of no return, due to any agreements signed without due process by the previous government. This appeal is to the President and the newly elected government to review this project very carefully, particularly in respect of the grave danger posed to our most valuable infrastructure resource, the Colombo Harbour, ignoring the many warnings given.

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