

Revive the Marcos Nuclear Power Program

by Ramtanu Maitra

The Philippines, a power-surplus nation in the 1960s, is now a power-short nation. Power outages in the capital city of Manila have become a routine discomfort. Are the authorities concerned about the power shortcomings? What one hears in the Philippines today is the promise to privatize the power sector to “solve” the problems. Psalm, a state company, is overseeing the privatization of the National Power Corporation’s (NAPOCOR’s) 35 power-generation plants. NAPOCOR’s transmission assets, valued at \$2 billion, have been spun off to the National Transmission Corp., or Transco. President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has instructed the Department of Energy to complete the privatization of NAPOCOR’s power-generation assets within two years, while the privatization of Transco is expected within six months.

Whatever activity one can see in the area of power generation is only in the geothermal area. Energy Secretary Vincent Perez has opened for public bidding ten “highly prospective” geothermal fields, aiming to add an additional 860-1,200 megawatts in the next ten years. In other words, a bankrupt nation, heavily dependent on imported oil, is promising its power-short citizens nothing better than 1,200 MW of additional capacity in the next ten years.

Bataan Nuclear Power Plant Closed Down

Such was not, however, the case in the Philippines in the 1960s and 1970s, when the nation looked to installation of nuclear power plants for electricity generation, to develop a strong electrical power sector. The first plant was set up in Bataan, despite strong opposition from anti-development environmentalists. A number of events, including especially the much-exaggerated Three Mile Island accident in the United States, played a role in making the Bataan plant into the most expensive tomb in the Philippines, and the nuclear program a story of the past.

On April 26, 2004, Dr. Alan T. Ortiz, president and chief executive officer of Transco, admitted that the reactor in the Bataan Nuclear Power Plant has already been removed. Nuclear power is no longer one of the options being eyed by the government to solve the power crisis. Ortiz admitted the reason in a recent press conference, when he said that nuclear power is a “very sensitive, expensive, and politically untenable option.” He said the nuclear club had only five members, namely the United States, China, Britain, France, and Russia.

“If you set up a nuclear power plant, you’ll be subjected to the most severe, most extreme conditions by the five members of the elite club,” Ortiz told newsmen. He said the five members of the nuclear power club determine the supply and the price of nuclear fuel, pointing out that the Philippines may not want to be put in a situation tantamount to going “from the frying pan into the fire.”

Look at the treatment the Philippines, received in trying to set up the Bataan Nuclear Power Plant. The BNPP is a 620 MW nuclear facility of the pressurized water reactor (PWR) type, located at Napot Point, Morong, overlooking the South China Sea. According to Raymund Jose Quilop, a professor with the University of the Philippines (Diliman), the Philippine government, in collaboration with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), passed the “Atomic Energy Regulatory and Liability Act of 1968.” In 1976, a contract for a nuclear power plant was signed with Westinghouse Electric Corp. Quilop wrote: “Unfortunately, construction work on the nuclear power plant was stopped in June 1979 after the Three Mile Island incident. A commission was formed to look into the plant’s safety. Consequently, after five months of inquiry, the commission recommended that additional safety upgrades be incorporated in the original design of the plant. Construction work resumed in September 1980. The inclusion of additional safety upgrades in the plant design lengthened the construction timetable by an additional 18 months and increased the cost of construction, to around US\$1.95 billion. In 1985, the nuclear power plant was finally completed and the first batch of nuclear fuel was delivered.”

Then, with the coup against President Marcos, the plant was mothballed. A Fact-Finding Mission constituted in 1992 pointed out that most of the technical questions regarding safety matters “can be addressed through a prudent and diligent refurbishing and upgrade program of the plant and a comprehensive and continuous training program for the plant’s personnel and that of the PNRI.” It was also pointed out that the Bataan plant’s location and seismic criteria of its design provide for safe operation. The plant had also been designed to withstand the strongest earthquake possible in the area, while its location 18 meters above sea level gave it protection from any lava flows that may come from a dormant, but maybe active, volcano, Mt. Natib, and from a possible tidal wave. The Mission also pointed out that the plant’s fuel is low-enriched uranium, which is non-explosive, while the spent fuel to be generated during the 30-year operation can be adequately stored in the plant’s storage space. With regard to the commercial viability, the Mission argued that nuclear power “represents a significant savings over the lifetime” of other plants (gas turbine, coal, combined cycle, and oil).

The Philippines is now paying the costs, both financial and in the physical economy, of the irrational rejection of this valuable resource.