

Test burn at Thar coal deposits planned in March

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ISLAMABAD, Dec 27: In a major development, the government has finalised preparations for test burn in March next year on coal deposits in Sindh's Thar desert for underground gasification which is expected to produce the much needed electricity almost equal to current power supplies besides sizeable oil production, senior nuclear scientist and Planning Commission member Dr Samar Mubarakmand disclosed on Monday.

Talking to Dawn, the renowned scientist said that only one per cent of the total Thar coal deposit on which he would start test burn in March could produce 10,000MW of electricity for 30 years and 100 million barrels of diesel. The electricity to be produced from block-5 would cost a maximum of Rs4 per unit, he said.

Spread over an area of 64 square kilometres, this is one of the eight coal blocks in Thar deposit. Another four blocks have been allocated to private companies from Australia, UAE, UK and a Pakistan firm Engro, which is in an advanced stage of arranging financing for the coal development, gasification and establishment of power plants. About four other blocks have yet to be allocated for development.

Mr Mubarakmand, who was given a one-year extension as member of the Planning Commission last week, said the deposit had the potential to transform Pakistan into a self-sufficient and energy-surplus country in a short span of eight to 10 years.

"It can produce 50,000MW of electricity for decades and 100 million barrels of oil for 500 years." According to estimates compiled by the National Electric Power Regulatory Authority (Nepra) last year, the average cost of generating electricity from water resources stood at about 50 paisa per unit, Rs4.50 from gas, Rs12 per unit from furnace oil and more than Rs16 per unit from diesel.

Interestingly, four power plants in the public sector cost about Rs15-17 per unit at present.

He said that orders for the import of compressors required for coal gasification had been placed for delivery shortly and hopefully these would be put in place for test burn by March. He dispelled an impression that the Thar coal, being of lignite quality, was not suitable for gasification and power generation.

In fact, the Thar coal was the most suitable for underground gasification and oil production, recalling that China was running eight similar fields very successfully, he said.

Under the underground coal gasification project spearheaded by Dr Samar Mubarakmand, there will be no need for excavation of coal to bring it on the ground and instead the coal will be converted into gas through chemical reactions underground.

Informed source said that Block 5 of Thar coalfield would produce up to 5MW of electricity after initial test burn through underground gasification. It will increase to 100MW on successful completion of the tests.

Pakistan is reported to have proven coal reserves of about 185 billion tons of lignite, which could not be brought into commercial operation because of continuous debate between federal and provincial governments on who should have control over natural resources.

In the process, a number of interested parties who were given exploration rights over some pockets of the deposits left the scene either because of their inability to secure the right technology or controversies over tariff structure and their lease had to be cancelled.

If the test burn is successful, it will lead to commercial utilisation of coal where a number of power companies were interested to set up their power plants. In the immediate future, this will also give a boost to a joint venture of the Sindh government and Engro to announce financial close for another project.

The government has already announced an incentive package for coal development envisaging exemption from taxes and import duties for 30 years on import of coal mining and construction machinery for Thar field.

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