

**Shahbaz asks govt to present new budget**

ISLAMABAD: Lambasting the government over the prevailing economic situation in the country, Opposition Leader Shahbaz Sharif on Wednesday asked the government to present a “new budget after withdrawing the IMF-dictated document” presented on June 11.

“We will not let this government run if this budget is not amended,” warned Mr Sharif in his two-and-a-half hours speech while opening the general debate on the budget in the National Assembly a day after a truce between the treasury and opposition members.

Before Mr Sharif, Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari briefly spoke and urged Speaker Asad Qaiser to issue production orders for four arrested MNAs, including former president Asif Zardari, to allow them to participate in the budget discussion.

Mr Sharif endorsed the PPP chairman’s demand and regretted the waste of four days when he was not allowed to speak by the treasury members through noisy protests to avenge the opposition’s act of shouting down the budget speech of the Minister of State for Revenue Hammad Azhar in the presence of Prime Minister Imran Khan.

Minister accuses PML-N of taking credit for old projects

Terming the budget “disappointing”, Mr Sharif said while in the opposition Imran Khan used to criticise the PML-N government for imposing indirect taxes whereas there were 70 per cent indirect taxes in the present budget.

“What happened today? The masters of U-turn in this budget have imposed 70 per cent indirect taxes,” he said.

Taking the government to task for approaching the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a bailout package, Mr Sharif feared that the government might have to make compromises on important national interests which could further worsen the situation. He warned of a “bloody revolution” in the country if things did not improve.

He said there was still time for the prime minister, whom he kept on calling Imran Niazi, to come to the parliament, admit his mistakes and seek an apology from the people, adding that parliament might “condone” Mr Khan’s previous acts and the opposition might allow him to take a “U-turn” on the budget.

Mr Sharif proposed a minimum of 50pc increase in the salaries of government officials up to grade-16, besides fixing the minimum wages at Rs20,000 per month. He also asked the government to restore the income tax exemption given by the PML-N government to those earning Rs100,000 salary. He also called for bringing the prices of electricity and gas to May 31, 2018, position which was the last day of the PML-N in the government.

Mr Sharif consumed a considerable time in highlighting the achievements of the previous PML-N government, saying when his party assumed power in 2013 through “genuine votes” of the people, they faced tremendous challenges, including electricity loadshedding and terrorism.

He claimed the PML-N government under the leadership of Nawaz Sharif generated 11,000 mega watt electricity and successfully eliminated loadshedding. He also said through Operations Zarb-i-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasad and with the sacrifices rendered by the armed forces they had managed to eliminate terrorism from the country and restore peace in Karachi.

He said the PML-N government brought the country out of the economic mess despite the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI)’s attempt to sabotage their efforts through a seven-month sit-in which also forced the Chinese president to postpone his visit to Pakistan.

Welcoming the PTI government’s decision to form a commission to examine the use of debts during the past 10 years, Mr Sharif said the commission would also have to look into the loans obtained during the rule of “military dictator” Gen Pervez Musharraf and the loans secured by the PTI-led government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP).

The opposition leader also castigated the PTI’s previous government in KP and the under construction Rapid Bus Transport (BRT) project, saying the BRT stood for the “biggest robbery in transport sector”. He claimed that the cost of the 27-km Peshawar BRT was more than the combined cost of three nearly 100-km long metro projects in Punjab. He also accused the PTI’s Punjab government of not completing the Orange Line Train project in Lahore.

Interestingly, it was Speaker Asad Qaiser who challenged Mr Sharif’s claim that the PTI had failed to set up any university and build hospitals in KP, saying a university had been set up in his hometown Swabi.

Similarly, when Mr Sharif regretted that the government did not give a positive response to his offer of signing a charter of economy, the speaker said he would play his role to bring the government and opposition closer for reaching the proposed charter.

Referring to the PM’s repeated claims that he would not strike a deal with the opposition over the corruption issue, the opposition leader asked Mr Khan to disclose the name of the person who had sought an NRO from him. He said the abbreviation of NRO, used for the National Reconciliation Ordinance promulgated by Gen Musharraf in 2007, stood for “notorious relief order”, adding that Mr Khan was not even authorised to issue any NRO.

“Please tell the country who asked for an NRO, when did they ask and who is the witness,” he went on saying.

Quoting official figures, Mr Sharif alleged that the PTI government had already taken over Rs5,000 billion loans in 10 just months whereas the PML-N government had obtained Rs10,600bn loans during five years.

Mr Sharif said the PPP and the PML-N were ready to appear before the commission that had been formed by the government under the deputy chairman of the National Accountability Bureau. He then listed a number of projects, including motorways, Gwadar port and a 22mw atomic power house, claiming that with the loan amount the PML-N had carried out “historic development” in the

country. On the other hand, he said, the incumbent government in its 10 months had not even launched a single mega project.

He recalled that Mr Khan had stated that he would “commit suicide but not go to the IMF” and said, “God forbid, he ever commits suicide, but he has taken the country to the brink of suicide.”

The opposition leader said Rs430 million had been allocated only for repair of the PM’s aircraft. He said the PTI had promised to build 5,000,000 houses, but not a single rupee had been allocated in the budget for low-cost houses.

He regretted that on one hand, houses and shops of the people had been demolished in Islamabad in the name of encroachment and, on the other hand, the Banigala residence of Mr Khan had been regularised.

Govt reaction

Responding to Mr Sharif’s speech, Federal Minister for Power Omar Ayub Khan alleged that the PML-N during the last days in the government had announced a number of measures like giving huge tax exemptions to the salaried class people only to secure votes.

“This two-party system has wreaked havoc on our country,” Mr Khan said, who had served as a minister in the cabinet of Gen Musharraf and had also remained a part of the treasury benches during the previous PML-N government.

He refuted the PML-N’s claims that economy had performed better during its era, saying the party had sustained the economy artificially by “printing additional currency notes and borrowing loans.”

He accused Mr Sharif of taking credit of the projects initiated by the military dictators Ayub Khan and Gen Musharraf, stating: “I wonder why PML-N is not taking credit of ideology of Pakistan,” he said in a sarcastic tone.

Amir Wasim