

Cabinet defers up to 14pc increase in oil prices

ISLAMABAD: The federal cabinet on Tuesday deferred up to 14 per cent increase in prices of petroleum products proposed by the Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority (Ogra) and referred the matter to the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) for further consideration.

A meeting of the cabinet presided over by Prime Minister Imran Khan also condemned the Pashtun Tahaffuz Movement (PTM) for its alleged involvement in 'anti-state activities' and announced that the civil and military leadership was on the same page on the issue.

It was also decided that Prime Minister Khan, Chief of the Army Staff Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa and former chief justice of Pakistan Mian Saqib Nisar would lay the foundation stone of the much-awaited Mohmand dam at a ceremony to be held on May 2.

The cabinet approved tabling of some bills in the National Assembly relating to whistle-blowing laws to curb corruption, timeline of cases in courts and provision of succession certificates in 15 days. It revised the timings of government offices for upcoming Ramazan and decided that working hours would be from 10am to 4pm.

The prime minister's recent visit to China also came under discussion and Mr Khan termed it a 'successful one'. The cabinet was briefed on the government's reforms agenda and the targets achieved in this regard.

Oil prices 'The Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority had proposed 14pc increase in oil prices, but the prime minister disagreed with the proposal and was of the view that burden of internationally increased prices of oil should not be transferred to the people,' Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Information Firdous Ashig Awan said at a post-cabinet meeting press conference.

She said that according to Ogra, the prices of oil had gone up in the international market due to sanctions slapped on Iran by US President Donald Trump.

'Ogra was of the view that either the government has to bear losses or the effect of internationally increased prices of oil be transferred to the consumers,' she added.

'Considering the agony of the people, the prime minister did not allow the 14pc proposed increase in oil prices and referred the issue to the ECC which is meeting on May 2,' she said.

The government, Ms Awan said, had also decided to conduct an audit of the Rs1,300 billion circular debt it had inherited from the previous PML-N regime. 'We want to bring facts before the people. Former rulers have left over Rs100bn debt only in Punjab, she added.

Pushtun rights movement Ms Awan said the civil and military leadership of the country was on the same page on the issue of the PTM whose leaders 'are involved in antistate activities'. Without mentioning a press conference of Inter-Services Public Relations Director General Maj Gen Asif Ghafoor in which he had hinted at a possible action against the PTM, she said that similar to a statement issued on Monday, the government would soon come up with its own comprehensive stance on the Pushtun ethnic rights movement.

The PM's assistant said the PTM leadership, and not the youth of tribal areas associated with the organisation, was working against the interest of the country, adding that the government had to deal with an iron hand those who were misguiding the youth of the tribal areas. 'The government will share its strategy with the media in this regard in the days to come,' she added.

Mohmand dam Minister for Water Resources Faisal Vawda, who was accompanying Ms Awan during the press conference, gave details about the foundation stone-laying ceremony for Mohmand dam and said Prime Minister Khan, Army Chief Gen Bajwa and for Chief Justice Saqib Nisar would attend it.

Interestingly, the ceremony is being held on May 2 despite the fact that the matter related to the controversial award of Rs309bn dam project has been sent to the National Accountability Bureau by the Pakistan Peoples Party through a complaint.

Earlier, the government had to postpone two inauguration ceremonies of the Mohmand dam scheduled for Jan 2 and Jan 13 due to controversy over the award of the project.

Media reports suggested that the government itself had made the project controversial when it considered 'single' financial bid of a consortium comprising three firms Descon, the company owned by Prime Minister's Adviser on Commerce and Industry RazakDawood, China Gezhouba and Voith Hydro as the second contestant a consortium consisting of the Frontier Works Organisation, Andritz Hydro and Power China was technically disqualified and its financial bid was not considered.

The technical bids of the two consortiums were opened in July last year and the financial bid of the consortium having Descon was opened in January this year, raising questions as to why the financial bid of the consortium was opened after a gap of six months.

On the other hand, the Water and Power Development Authority claimed that no 'illegality' had been committed in the process of award of the project.

Cabinet approves bills Firdous Ashig Awan said some proposed bills to be tabled in the National Assembly were approved by the cabinet. She said that under a whistleblowing bill, a person who identifies corruption in government departments would be given protection and 20 per cent share in recovery in corruption cases.

She said that under another bill, the National Database and Registration Authority would be authorised to issue succession certificate in 15 days. 'It will end lengthy process of issuance of the certificate by relevant local administrations, she added.

The PM's special assistant said the government would also introduce a bill to give timeline to the courts to decide cases in one-and-a-half to two years.

The cabinet also approved publishing of an advertisement for the appointment of chairman and members of the Capital Development Authority.

Syed Irfan Raza