

Gas bills'

There has been immense outrage in the past week or so regarding the unbelievably huge gas bills handed to many gas consumers. This was the result of a hike in gas tariffs in October last year. Now, the PM's Office seems to be saying it had nothing to do with this gas tariff hike. Back then, the decision to hike gas tariffs by over 140 percent for some consumers was passed with much self-congratulation by the sitting government. This week, after the astonishingly high tariff hikes showed up in winter gas bills, the PM Office claimed it was ordering an 'inquiry' into the matter. Lest it be forgotten, the gas tariff hike went back and forth between the PM's Office, Ogra, the petroleum ministry and the federal cabinet when it was first mooted.

The public was told that it was a much-needed decision that had to be taken – or else the gas sector would face a crippling circular debt crisis. This was once again notwithstanding the fact that the accounts of both SNGPL and SSGC showed profits for the last fiscal year. The figures put forward are worth remembering once again. Consumers who used up 400 cubic metres of gas would see their gas bills go up from Rs5,500 to Rs24,000 per month. This was no joke and this is clear from the delayed public outcry on the decision.

What is worth wondering is whether the PM announcing an inquiry into the matter amounts to the government admitting that it had insufficient grounds to order such a significant gas hike in the first place. The question that should be asked is: has the government been taken for a ride by the oil and gas bureaucracy? If the PTI government was hasty in deciding to increase gas prices, the blame must be fixed at the very top. It would be an admission of complete incompetence at the level of the cabinet – if not higher. The entire exercise that the government is claiming to perform now via a four-member committee is exactly what it claimed to do when it introduced the current seven-slab system for domestic gas users.

What is needed is not merely a revision of gas slabs to make them more in line with public opinion, but a fair assessment of whether there were severe errors of judgment involved in the original gas price hike in the first place. What is of far more concern for citizens is that their gas bills have shot through the roof at a time when gas loadshedding has been at a peak. High prices should have at least guaranteed supply, but the government has also failed to ensure regular gas supply. As the cabinet is set to meet again to discuss the matter, the government must either stand by its original decision and defend its rationale or heads must roll.

Editorial