

**Opposition, govt senators trade barbs over gas shortage**

ISLAMABAD: The opposition and the government on Friday traded barbs in the Senate over gas shortage, with the former slamming the latter for depriving the provinces of Sindh and Balochistan of their due share in gas. The government blamed the previous governments of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) for the crisis.

"Sindh is producing nearly 70 per cent of gas in the country, yet it is the one facing a massive gas shortage. This defies the Constitution. Article 158 clearly gives Sindh the first right over the gas it produces," PPP parliamentary leader in the Senate Sherry Rehman said while speaking on a calling attention notice on gas shortage across the country, particularly in Sindh.

"I am certainly not suggesting that Sindh should not supply gas to the rest of the country, but it should get as much gas as it requires. Is it fair that Sindh, which produces around 2,500mmcf (million cubic feet per day) gas, is hardly receiving 800 to 900mmcf as its people suffer?"

She said the supply-demand gap for gas in the country had widened to 12pc and the situation was worsening. "From Quetta to Karachi several cities have been experiencing severe cold weather without gas. Despite raising gas prices by over 200pc, people face shortage of gas," she added.

*Some treasury members join protest over gas crisis in Balochistan*

Ms Rehman said the PPP wanted an amicable resolution of such issues. She regretted that the federal government called meetings to address such issues once it was pushed to the wall, but then there were no follow-ups. "Their attitude can lead to a constitutional crisis between Sindh and the Centre. It is staggering that despite Sindh's massive contribution to production of gas in the country, it has no representation in the Oil and Gas Regulatory Authority (Ogra) and other government-owned energy organisations."

Rejecting the Centre's claim that Sindh is not allowing it to lay gas pipelines, she claimed that the federal government had neither given any pricing formula to the province nor had it held any discussion with it to resolve the issue equitably.

Ms Rehman said the federal government was asking Sindh to purchase expensive imported gas under the weighted average cost formula. Why should Sindh buy expensive gas when it produced its own, she asked.

The price of local gas was Rs820 per unit while the price of LNG was much higher at around Rs1,700 per unit, she said, adding that "mathematically, it makes no sense".

Ms Rehman demanded that the matter be sent to the Senate committee concerned.

Responding to the calling attention notice, Minister for Energy Omar Ayub Khan alleged that the PML-N and PPP governments were responsible for the gas crisis as no major exploration activity had been carried out during their 10 years in power. He said the two previous governments announced no policy of incentives to attract investment in the sector and resultantly the gap between demand and supply kept on increasing.

The minister said the total gas demand in the country stood at 6.5bcfd (billion cubic feet per day), while the total production came to 3.5bcfd. Even if 1.2bcfd of liquefied natural gas (LNG) was accounted for, a huge gap remained, he added.

According to him, Sindh produces 2,243mmcfd gas and 1,200-1,300mmcfd gas goes to Sindh and Balochistan through the Sui Southern Gas network. In addition, 700mmcfd gas goes to dedicated power and fertiliser companies operating within Sindh and 500mmcfd to SNGPL (Sui Northern Gas Pipelines Limited) out of which 258mmcfd goes back to Sindh. "These allocations had been made by the PML-N and PPP governments. Why you are holding us responsible for it?" he asked.

The minister said Sindh had been warned in the beginning of 2019 that it was bound to face a severe crisis in the upcoming winter and a right of way had been sought from wells to pipelines to supply gas to Sindh. He regretted that the right was not given. "We could have provided 65mmcfd of gas had the right of way been given," he said.

The minister claimed that the province did not allow construction of 17-kilometre pipeline for supplying LNG to Punjab.

He said the priority to get gas of the province was subject to commitments and obligations under the Constitution. He said Article 158 of the Constitution read: "The Province in which a well-head of natural gas is situated shall have precedence over other parts of Pakistan in meeting the requirements from that well-head, subject to the commitments and obligations.....".

He said oilfields of Sindh would be insufficient to meet the requirements of the province in the next two years, if a solution was not found. He asked Sindh government to negotiate weighted average cost of gas with the federal government.

A highlight of the proceedings was a symbolic protest by the senators from Sindh and Balochistan against the gas shortage in the two provinces which was also joined by the treasury members. Over a dozen protesting senators staged a brief sit-in in front of the chairman's podium to mark their protest just before the energy minister's remarks in response to the calling attention notice.

Normally, a protest is recorded by staging a walkout from the house.

The PML-N parliamentary leader, however, objected to the way the protest was staged, observing that this would set a wrong tradition. "We are with you in your demands, but this is not the way," he remarked.

At the outset of the sitting, a member of the treasury benches, Sarfraz Ahmed Bugti of the Balochistan Awami Party, protested against non-provision and shortage of gas in Sui town of Balochistan that itself is a natural gas field. "Pakistan Petroleum Limited and Sui Southern Gas Company Limited have deprived Sui town of natural gas," he alleged.

"I don't see a better forum than this to protest because I have talked to them at every forum but to no avail," he said, adding that most of the people don't know that natural gas has been named after Sui in Pakistan.