

Govt approves 121 gas schemes despite huge deficit

ISLAMABAD: Amid a soaring gas crisis, the government has approved 121 countrywide gas development schemes at the cost of Rs6.051 billion for 2019-2020.

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has received the maximum number of 61 schemes followed by Sindh 42, Punjab 17 and Islamabad just one. The schemes' approval needs the Petroleum Division's green light. Despite a stiff opposition by the Petroleum Division's top bosses, the government has given the go-ahead for 121 gas development schemes to beef up the political clout in the constituencies of the PTI MPs.

The Petroleum Division kept on saying in various meetings that the country faced a huge gas deficit but the government approved the schemes. However, no gas development scheme has been approved for Balochistan. The decision was taken in a steering committee meeting on Sustainable Development Goals Achievements Program (SAP) headed by Minister for Defense Pervaiz Khattak. The meeting was held on December 2, 2019 attended by federal ministers Shafqat Mehmood, Fehmida Mirza, Makhdoom Khusró Bakhtiar, Omar Ayub Khan, Ghulam Sarwar Khan, Ali Mohammad Khan, and MNAs Aamer Mehmood Kiani, Aftab Hussain Siddiqui, Khan Muhammad Khan Jamali, Amer Dogar, and Aminul Haq. The Federal Minister for Planning Division Asad Umar attended the meeting as guest.

An official source said 25,000,00 applications for gas connection were still pending with the Sui Northern, and if they were connected, about 150-200 MMCFD gas would also be consumed. The said schemes are subject to provision of certification by the Petroleum Division. However, the head of the steering committee on SAP has stepped up pressure on the Petroleum Division for issuing the required certification. In the follow-up meeting, the official said, Pervaiz Khattak got angry when the Petroleum Division opposed the decision taken in December 2 meeting and argued that the KP and Sindh have surplus gas and the government will complete the gas development schemes at any cost. "Balochistan also has surplus, but no gas schemes were approved for that province," the official said.

In the said meeting, Khattak said that in the provinces where gas was surplus for gas development schemes, there was no need for a certificate from the Petroleum Division. However, the Punjab is a province where gas deficit is on the higher side and for gas development scheme there, the Petroleum Division was required to give certificate. But representative from the Punjab objected to this observation of Khattak saying when the Punjab had surplus wheat it was not allowed to export the commodity, but first asked to cater to the food needs of the provinces where wheat was less produced.

When contacted, Pervaiz Khattak said: "Yes, I asked the Petroleum Division officials that Sindh, Balochistan and KP are surplus in gas and therefore there is no need to have a certification from the Petroleum Division." However, he insisted that the decision of 121

schemes had not finalised yet and all would be made as per law. He said people would be provided with gas through the development schemes.

Asked if the development schemes were being initiated to beef up political clout in the PTI constituencies, he said the government took the decision to facilitate the masses. Asked why the government was launching new gas schemes when the country was facing gas deficit, he said Sindh, Balochistan and KP have surplus gas. However, he advised against printing and highlighting the news about the new gas development schemes. He said during the PML-N government, the cabinet committee had approved gas development schemes and now he headed the Steering Committee to approve the schemes.

The Petroleum Division spokesman Ayub Chaudhary, Additional Secretary (P) said they were waiting for the minutes of the follow-up meeting of steering committee and after that Federal Minister for Energy Omar Ayub would be updated on the minutes and then a decision would be taken accordingly. However, he agreed that gas was not enough for more connections.

According to minutes of the December 2 meeting available with The News, for Nowshera alone, Pervez Khattak managed to get approval for 40 gas development schemes. It is pertinent to mention that Nowshera is the constituency of Pervez Khattak. The steering Committee approved 19 development schemes for Malakand and two for Mardan to beef up the PTI political base in the two areas. In Sindh, the PTI has approved 42 gas development schemes only in Badin to appease its allies including Dr Fahmida Mirza and others in Badin but no gas scheme for any other part of Sindh was approved.

For Punjab the Steering committee approved 17 schemes including three for Bahawalpur, two for Chakwal, five for Faisalabad, two each for Gujrat and Rahim Yar Khan, and one each of Rawalpindi, Sargodha and Islamabad.