

**Way cleared to implement reforms agenda, Senate told**

ISLAMABAD: The Senate was informed on Monday that the way for the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) government to implement its reforms agenda was clear now as the short- and medium-term balance of payments crisis had been averted.

Winding up discussion on the terms and conditions of the foreign loans obtained or being obtained, Minister of State for Finance Hammad Azhar said that there was an immediate balance of payments crisis when the present government took over.

He, however, said that Pakistan was out of the woods now with a support package from Saudi Arabia and the commitment from China to bridge the remaining gap. He added that modalities for the support from China were being worked out.

The minister disclosed that data of 96,000 offshore account holders from Pakistan from 27 countries had been obtained while data from another 13 countries was in process.

About the Panama Papers, he said 444 Pakistani individuals holding bank accounts abroad had been identified, adding that 242 of them had not been proceeded against for their cases being 'time barred'. He, however, said that the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR) had not launched action against these 242 individuals. He said action against another 150 could not be taken due to incomplete particulars.

Bill seeking to bind foreign investors to employ locals as 60pc of their workforce proposed

He disclosed that the government was in the process of improving the definition of economic indicators to bring gimmicks in economy and accountancy to an end.

Rejecting criticism of Prime Minister Imran Khan speaking about corruption in Pakistan during a visit to China, he said credibility was eroded by fudging of figures and not by the talk of corruption and accountability. "It only shows the resolve of the government to act against the corrupt," he remarked.

Referring to the government's plan to provide gas and electricity to textile and some other industrial sectors, he said they were in competition with exporters from China, India and Bangladesh.

"They will be offered concession on a par with the regional competitors," he said.

Mr Azhar said the exports had registered an increase of 4.6 per cent in recent days, while imports had gone down.

"We do not believe in deficit finance growth. It is not appropriate to mortgage your strategic assets. Economy can only be run on the principles of economy," said.

Petroleum Minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan in his speech criticised the previous PML-N government for signing a long-term contract of 15 years for import of LNG, with a dubious clause under which the agreement would remain classified for three years even after its expiration.

He said the government was now focused on exploration and open bids would be invited for ten blocks shortly, adding that a new petroleum policy would be unveiled next year. The minister said that the boards of all companies under the petroleum ministry would have representation from all provinces.

Labour protection bills

Meanwhile, former Senate opposition leader Sherry Rehman submitted two labour-related bills to amend the Board of Investment Ordinance 2001 and the Foreign Private Investment (Promotion and Protection) Act 1976. The bills aim to provide legislative support for the local workforce.

Speaking on the floor of the house, Ms Rehman said: “We have the 10th largest labour force with nearly 1.5 million people entering it annually yet there seems to be no concrete plan in place for them. With the projected surge of FDI in Pakistan, it is mandatory to enact these laws. The government should have done this much sooner.

“The first bill is an amendment to the Foreign Private Investment (Promotion and Protection) Act 1976 which aims to set a quota seeking to guarantee that foreign investors hire at least 60pc of local labour for their projects from the particular province of its operations.”

The second bill, she explained, was an amendment to the Board of Investment Ordinance 2001 which called for mapping labour expertise, capacity, training and experience in one database categorised by provinces.

Iftikhar A. Khan