

**Provinces to levy Re1 on every litre of extracted water, SC told**

ISLAMABAD: The Sup-reme Court was informed on Tuesday that the four provincial governments had agreed to impose a levy of Re1 on every litre of water extracted from the aquifer to sell it as bottled mineral water.

Subsequently, a three-judge bench headed by Chief Justice Mian Saqib Nisar ordered that the notification issued by the provincial governments in this regard be furnished before the court for examination.

The bench, which had taken up a suo motu case about selling of bottled water extracted from underground sources without any charge and its fitness for human consumption, also appointed a committee consisting of Prof Dr Mohammad Ahsan Siddiqui, an environmental scientist, Director General of the Environment Protection Agency (EPA) Farzana Altafshah and others to inspect eight different companies selling bottled water in the market.

During the hearing, Sindh Advocate General Salman Talibuddin took the stance that the decision to levy Re1 per litre also covered the beverage companies. But Advocate Munwarul Islam, representing one of the beverage companies, stated that the levy was only confined to bottled water companies. The court, however, decided to finalise the matter on Monday at the Lahore Registry of the Supreme Court.

Dr Siddiqui furnished a report regarding his inspection of facilities set up by Nestle Pakistan in Karachi. He was asked to conduct a thorough inspection of other eight companies. The entire expenses of travelling, lodging and boarding will be borne by the respective companies.

The court decided to finalise the average amount to be imposed on the companies for extracting the water from the underground sources for a number of years.

During the hearing, the chief justice emphasised that whatever exercise the Supreme Court had initiated was in the ultimate benefit of the entire country and for the industry as well since the amount so collected from the companies will be utilised for the water management.

“We will ensure that no injustice be done to anyone,” the chief justice observed also recalling how China made so much advances by developing its industry.

The court also expressed surprise over the amount of profit the retailers of the bottled water were earning to the staggering Rs12 per bottle.

At the last hearing, a forensic audit on the bottled water business of Nestle Pakistan had informed the court that the company earned a net profit of Rs739.5 million in 2017, but strangely the distributors and retailers earned a net profit by 276 per cent, or Rs2 billion, in the same year.

This showed that the profit margins of distributors and retailers were very high compared to Nestle Pakistan’s earnings and seemed unjustified, the report had stated.

The court had also regretted that the companies were selling water after extracting it from the ground almost for free.

The court ordered to forward the recommendations developed during a recent seminar held at the Supreme Court on the water scarcity to the federal and provincial governments.

The governments have been asked to furnish in 10 days their viewpoint explaining how they will implement the recommendations and also come out with a clear stance if they have any difficulty in implementing the same.

Dr Siddiqui, who visited the Nestle plant at Port Qasim, Karachi, stated in his report that the bottled companies were extracting 30 tonnes per hour or 720 tonnes (720,000 litres per day) and the expansion plans suggested increasing the capacity to 70 per cent per hour.

On average 60pc of water is rejected during the Reverse Osmosis (RO) and the concentrated fluid or waste water is drained in an industrial drain adjacent to Karachi Grain, the report said, adding that RO was the technique to remove bulk particles like ions, molecules, etc., from the water to be used for drinking.

Thus the extensive water drawing rate may seriously harm the natural aquifer and the waste water produced with such high salt concentration would have adverse effects on the micro environment, which is also prohibited under the Sindh Environmental Protection Act, 2014.

The report recommended installing a waste treatment or salt recovery plant for water rejected by RO to control the utter violation of the Sindh EPA until such time operations must be stopped to save the environment from pollution wrath. It, however, recommended Rs5 per litre of water extracted by the company.

Dr Siddiqui told the court that the water from River Indus was far better for human consumption than the bottled water if bacteria or micro organisms were removed from it. Likewise, the water with 10 drops of Sodium Hypochlorite in 10 litres was also far better than the bottled water, he said.

The Newspaper's Staff Reporter