

**No ban on opening foreign currency account, Senate informed**

The State Minister for Revenue Hammad Azhar informed the Senate on Wednesday that neither there is any ban on opening foreign currency account in the country nor would the government resort to any such step. The House was informed that the current account deficit amounted to \$12.6 billion and \$18.98 billion during the fiscal years 2016-17 and 2017-18, respectively, resulting in pressure on Pakistani rupee and its depreciation.

Replying to a question by Senator Atique Sheikh during the question hour, Federal Finance Minister Asad Umar said that the government/ State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) is pursuing monetary tightening to curb aggregate demand that would result in reducing current account deficit.

The question hour had a bumpy start, as on finding that the ministers concerned were absent from the House whose questions were listed, joint opposition staged a walkout from the Senate, compelling Senate Chairman Muhammad Sadiq Sanjrani to order ringing of bells. In the meantime, some legislators joined the treasury benches and opposition senators also returned to the House.

In a written reply, the minister noted administrative measures had also been taken to reduce import volume and recently the SBP withdrew the facility of advance payments against imports and imposed 100 percent cash margin requirement on import of various non-essential items.

Azhar said during the last five years, exports had been between around \$24-25 billion. However, there had been 13-14 percent increase in remittances in the last quarter. He alleged the freezing of foreign exchange by the then finance minister Sartaj Aziz had caused incalculable loss to Pakistan.

To another question by Senator Dilawar Khan, Asad Umar told the House in writing that during the last 10 years, foreign assistance (loans and grants) amounting to \$75,344 million were received, which included \$53,585 million loans, \$7,474 million grants and \$14,286 million loans from the International Monetary Fund.

"Loans and grants were obtained mainly for financing projects of national importance, budgetary/balance of payments support, rehabilitation after earthquakes and floods, import of commodities and poverty reduction," he explained.

Likewise, total domestic loans obtained during this period were Rs 13,140 billion from 2008-09 to 2017-18. The biggest chunk of Rs 1,883 billion loans was obtained during 2012-13. All these loans, he noted, were received for budgetary support.

In reply to a question about the income tax and sales tax and federal excise duty refund claims pending with the Federal Board of Revenue as on August 31, 2018, the minister said there were a total of 72,595 income tax claims, amounting to Rs 85,678 million, while sales tax and federal excise duty claims totalled 107,900 as on August 31, 2018 to the tune of Rs 138,303 million.

The minister explained the amounts of claims which were pending for various reasons such as non-verification of the claimed amount, refund claim not being admissible, failure of the claimant to provide requisite documents and non-removal of objections in certain cases.

He said the amount of domestic loans outstanding against the government was Rs 16,415 billion at the end of June 2018. Minister for Planning, Development and Reform Makhdoom Khusró Bakhtiar said no item, machinery, material etc had been purchased by the ministry since July 2013 as well as the organisations

affiliated with the ministry. However, he said that information in respect of the National Logistic Cell (NLC) is being obtained and would be provided shortly. He explained that he in the morning asked about the matter and he was informed that information would be shared within 24 hours.

To another question, the minister told that placement and alumni affairs officer of the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics had been absent from office since October 02, 2018, after submitting application for extraordinary leave for two years. The application had not been so far approved and that PIDE had informed that it had been brought to their notice that he was working in a private organisation.

"The PIDE has informed that the competent authority has not granted permission to the said officer to join other organisation. After due process i.e. appropriate fact-finding inquiry the case will be disposed of accordingly under the relevant rules by the PIDE," he said.

In reply to a question by Senator Atique Sheikh, Minister for Science and Technology Senator Muhammad Azam Swati conceded in the House that since long, 24 state-of-the-art water quality testing laboratories have been shut. However, he vowed to establish such labs in all districts across Pakistan.

He also regretted that the educated and skilled officers and employees of the labs were sent home and unskilled people on political basis were inducted, adding the board of governors of Pakistan Council of Research in Water Resources (PCRWR) failed to meet for two years and met recently and those officers who had been sent home are being reinstated.

The PCRWR, he noted, was presently in a very bad shape but it would regain its glory soon and that he would promote research to ensure safe drinking water for people of Pakistan.

ZULFIQAR AHMAD