

Opposition slams govt for PSDP cut, gas price hike

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ISLAMABAD: The government on Wednesday came under fire in the Senate for a colossal cut in development budget, heavy taxation and unprecedented hike in gas tariff, with opposition lawmakers wondering if it was the 'change' the Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf leadership had been talking about.

The opposition senators also claimed that many of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects had been dropped. They reminded the ruling PTI of its pre-election promises and said the actions taken by the government, including huge indirect taxation, would overburden the common man.

"Where is the new Pakistan I am still looking for it," former opposition leader in the Senate Sherry Rehman said in her hard-hitting speech. She said that being inexperienced was not a crime but it was criminal to keep the country in complete financial insecurity. "I wish first 100 days of government do not turn out to be 100 jokes," she remarked.

Senators say such actions will overburden common man, claim several CPEC projects have been dropped

The Pakistan Peoples Party senator accused the government of promoting "black economy" and said it was sending a negative message to the genuine taxpayers by allowing non-tax filers to purchase luxury cars and precious properties. "This policy of rewarding non-taxpayers is flawed and incomprehensible."

Ms Rehman said current account deficit had reached an alarming level of \$39 billion while foreign exchange reserves dropped to a dangerously low level. Terming the mini-budget something non-serious, she said it lacked a blueprint to bridge current deficit and payback loans.

She said it appeared that the government was set to approach the International Monetary Fund (IMF) with a "big begging bowl". She asked the government to explain as to who would provide the much-needed finances. "Will these be provided by Saudi Arabia, China or IMF or be generated by floating bonds?"

The PPP senator also criticised the policy of seeking donations for building dams and noted that it would take decades to collect the huge amount required for it. She said there was a trend of building small reservoirs in the world and pointed out that Sri Lanka and India had built 12,000 and 19,000 small dams, respectively.

Senator Mushahid Hussain Sayed of the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz said it was unfortunate that the incumbent government had tried to make the CPEC controversial by its mistakes, adding that a government adviser had given a controversial statement about the corridor project.

Mr Sayed said the government had promised not to abandon key development projects, but claimed that it dropped four CPEC and 12 Gwadar Port projects, adding that the CPEC projects had generated 70,000 job opportunities.

He regretted that Higher Education Commission's 45 projects worth Rs5 billion had also been abandoned. He termed the budget devastating for the economic prosperity of the country and said doubts had been created about the CPEC. He expressed the hope that

these doubts would be removed during Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to China in November.

Senator Javed Abbasi of the PML-N said the party's previous government had not increased gas prices throughout its five-year term, but the PTI government increased its rates by up to 143 per cent even before announcing the mini-budget.

He said promises had been made to reduce taxes, but Rs178bn new taxes had been imposed, adding that the heavy taxation, hike in gas prices, withdrawal of subsidy and Rs305bn cut in the development package were indications that the government was trying to please the IMF. He said the cut in development budget was not in the interests of the country.

Senator Abbasi said Prime Minister Khan had in his post-election speech said the heads of the nation hang in shame when their rulers move with a begging bowl, but now it was clear that they had decided to approach the IMF and had already met the conditionalities they asked for before giving a bailout package. He demanded the reversal of all these steps which would overburden the common man.

He said the cut in the PSDP would increase unemployment, contrary to the promises of providing 10 million jobs. He also said the government was not serious about building dams. "Had they been serious, they would have allocated some funds for the construction of dams," he remarked.

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