

Gas supply rationed

FROM PAGE 1

As a medium-term solution, Petrobangla will have to complete the Ashuganj-Manohardi pipeline project and also the Dhanua to Savar pipeline project. These pipelines will help increase gas supplies.

During this phase, Petrobangla will add 45 mmcf of gas from the Kailashila field and another 25 mmcf from the Titas field.

In the third phase, the government must make sure that Unocal's Bibiyana gas field starts supplying gas from December 2006. Besides, energy sources will have to be diversified to reduce pressure on gas and power utilisation by 400 to 500 mw through load management.

Yesterday's high-level meeting, chaired by Prime Minister's Principal Secretary Dr Kamal Siddiqui, finally reached a consensus on a gas rationing system apparently in a bid to meet the country's top trade bodies' demand for an end to the energy crisis.

Siddiqui blasted the officials, asking why the government should be in an embarrassing position because of their failure. He said the previous BNP regime suffered for fertiliser crisis and the present regime might suffer for power crisis. He said the government is being blamed for the failure of the officials.

Business leaders and energy officials fear a gas rationing system is unlikely to improve the situation dramatically despite the fact that a suspension of the gas supply to the

Tongi power plant and Polish fertiliser factory will save 45 mmcf of gas against a shortfall of 100 mmcf of gas in supply.

Meanwhile, the country's top trade bodies yesterday expressed apprehension that the acute energy crisis might deal a severe blow both to local production and export. They urged the energy ministry for immediate actions to tackle the crisis situation.

The recommendations of the working committee will take effect soon after getting the prime minister's nod.

Talking to reporters at his office yesterday, Energy Advisor Mahmudur Rahman said he would prepare a summary of the report and submit it to the prime minister for her consideration.

In the face of the energy crisis, the energy ministry had initiated the plan for introducing gas rationing in the power and industrial sector and convened a meeting.

But the high-level emergency meeting last Thursday at the prime minister's office (PMO) failed to reach a consensus as the power division and industries ministry refused to shut down any of its plants to avoid a gas crisis.

The meeting formed a high-powered working committee, comprising secretaries of the power and energy division and the chairmen of Petrobangla, PDB and BCIC to chalk out the plans for rationing aiming at

ensuring a smooth supply of gas.

The committee, which was asked to submit its report by Sunday, sat again yesterday and finalised its recommendations.

Referring to the stoppage of gas supply to the Tongi power plant for the last few days, the energy advisor said a gas rationing system in fact is already in place.

The advisor claimed that the Tongi power plant has already been closed down, solving 90 percent of the [gas] crisis.

The Power Division, however, has yet to be informed of it. "I am not aware of this. The energy advisor knows very well about it as he has taken the decision," State Minister for Power Iqbal Hassan Mahmood told reporters at his office.

TOP TRADE BODIES MEET WITH ENERGY ADVISOR

The top leaders of the trade bodies--FBCCI, BGMEA, BKMEA and BCIA-- at a meeting with the energy advisor narrated the difficulties they are having in running factories.

Assuring the worried trade leaders of the uninterrupted supply of gas, the energy advisor said they have already initiated some steps including introduction of a gas rationing system to resolve the crisis. But the high-level working committee could not submit its report to the ministry on the system even a day after the deadline, he observed.

Mahmudur Rahman assured the

business leaders that the gas rationing would not hamper manufacture and export-oriented industries in the continuation of their growth and in contributing to MDG, PRPS and providing employment.

Describing the private sector as the mainstay in creating employment opportunities, FBCCI President Mir Nasir Hossain said, "But the private sector is not having adequate support from the government's utility services. There will obviously be an increase in unemployment if the production of this sector is hindered."

Calling for an uninterrupted gas supply, he said the local industries have been failing to fulfil a commitment to the local and foreign buyers due to the existing gas crisis.

A BGMEA leader said the target for export is increasing, but they are struggling to meet the demand of the buyers due to the worsening energy situation.

"In the industrial regions of Gazipur and Savar, the pressure of gas is very low and it is hampering the production as the factories cannot be run smoothly," Shahidul Islam,

vice-president of BGMEA, told the meeting.

He said production has to be stopped for three to four hours a day due to the crisis.

"I had to cancel delivery orders worth \$4 million dollar in the last seven days as the shortage of gas supply forced me to scale back production in my factories in Konabari," Atiqul Islam, former vice-president of the BGMEA, told reporters after the meeting.

BKMEA President Fazlul Haque said, "We have been facing shortage of energy over the years, but it now it seems to have gotten even worse."

Rashed Moudud Khan, chief of the Bangladesh Ceramics Industries Association (BCIA), told the meeting that buyers are reluctant to give new work orders in fear of delayed shipments that might result from the crisis.

A top leader said that even though the gas supply to the Tongi power plant has been snapped for the last few days, the situation has still not improved.

Security blanket

FROM PAGE 1

members of the advance security team led by Director of Indian Special Protection Group (SPG) BV Wanchoo attended the meeting from the Indian side.

Trained like the US Secret Service, the SPG with about 3000 personnel, provides protection to the VIPs, including the president and the prime minister. Recruits include police and NSG commandos. The officer corps consists of IPS officers from various state or central cadres. It was formed after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984.

Chief of Protocol of the Maldives Abdullah Hamid is leading a two-member advance team, as the country has no mission in Dhaka.

Among others from the Bangladesh side, high officials from the Special Security Force (SSF) were present at the meeting.

Talking to the diplomatic reporters, foreign ministry spokesperson Zahirul

Haque said it was basically a routine meeting for apprising the officials and advance teams of the Saarc member states of the preparations and other aspects of the summit.

"Officials from the Saarc member states, high commissions and embassies in Dhaka and the members of the advance teams from India and the Maldives are quite satisfied with the security and protocol arrangements taken up by the government of Bangladesh," he said.

The officials and the members of the advance teams would start visiting the venues jointly with the Bangladesh officials today to check out the preparations.

Meeting sources said the joint teams visited the State Guest House Padma yesterday and will inspect Bangabhaban, Sheraton and Sonargaon hotels, State Guest House Jamuna, mazar of late president Ziaur Rahman, Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre

(BCFC) and International Conference Centre (ICC) at the Prime Minister's Office today.

The joint teams will also visit the Zia International Airport, National Mausoleum at Savar and Brac Centre at Gazipur tomorrow.

According to the sources, heads of the state and government, foreign ministers and foreign secretaries would stay at Dhaka Sheraton Hotel during the summit while other officials of the delegations of the member states and journalists in Sonargaon Hotel.

The opening ceremony will take place at BCFC and the closing function at ICC.

The heads of states and governments will visit the mazar of late president Zia, the pioneer of Saarc concept, and attend reception at Bangabhaban. State Guest House Jamuna is likely to play the retreat for them, while their spouses will have recreation at Brac centre.

Meanwhile, sources said the Indian security agencies have decided to beef up security of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh during the summit. They also want an Indian bullet-proof convoy for Singh like the one he had in Islamabad in 2004.

Some 250-300 members of the official delegations of Saarc countries are expected to come to Dhaka, and around 300 foreign media personnel are likely to cover the summit.