

FUEL PRICE HIKE

‘It’s nothing but insanity’  
Says Rashed Khan Menon

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Workers’ Party President Rashed Khan Menon yesterday said the government’s decision to increase the fuel price ahead of the next national election is nothing but insanity.

“This is a desperate decision. It will have a huge impact – politically, socially and financially – on the lives of the people,” he told The Daily Star.

A key leader in the ruling Awami League-led 14-party alliance and veteran lawmaker, Menon said the government should have discussed it in a political forum, and also with the ruling alliance, before taking such a big decision.

“I even heard that many ministers were not aware about this vital decision.”

Coming down heavily on the government, the leftist politician said the decision was not taken in the interest of the people in any way.

“This was a bureaucratic decision. The government could never take such a decision with the people in mind.”

Menon said the fuel price hike will affect transportation, agriculture and the daily lives of citizens.



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“In whose interest did the government do this at a time when fuel prices have decreased globally?”

It, in fact, hiked the price as part of a strategy to lift the subsidies on the power sector in order to meet the conditions the IMF has given to take a loan.

“In case of urgency, the government could have hiked the price by five to 10 percent. Increasing it exorbitantly is unacceptable.”

Menon also said the government’s logic behind the hike is also misleading people.

The lawmaker from Dhaka-8 demanded the government revoke its decision.

The fuel price hike, by up to 51.7, was announced on Friday and took effect from Saturday.



This handout picture taken and released by the Ukrainian Emergency Service yesterday, shows firefighters working to put out a fire after a missile was shot down and landed on civilian infrastructure in Uman district, Cherkasy region, amid Russia's military invasion launched on Ukraine.

PHOTO: AFP

Russia accuses Ukraine of nuclear plant shelling

Warns of ‘catastrophic consequences’ for Europe

AGENCIES

The Kremlin yesterday accused Ukrainian forces of firing on the Zaporizhzhia atomic power plant, warning against potential “catastrophic consequences” for Europe.

“The shelling of the territory of the nuclear plant by the Ukrainian armed forces is a potentially extremely dangerous activity... fraught with catastrophic consequences for a vast area, including the territory of Europe,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

He called on Ukraine’s allies “to use their influence to prevent the continuation of such shelling”.

Moscow and Kyiv have blamed each other for strikes on the atomic power plant, where recent fighting sparked a UN warning of a potential nuclear disaster.

Zaporizhzhia – Europe’s largest atomic power complex that was occupied by Russia early in its offensive -- has in recent days been the scene of military strikes that have damaged several structures, forcing the shutdown of a reactor.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemned such attacks and called for international inspectors to be given access

to the nuclear plant.

“Any attack (on) a nuclear plant is a suicidal thing,” Guterres told a news conference in Japan, where he attended the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Ceremony on Saturday to commemorate the 77th anniversary of the world’s first atomic bombing.

Kyiv yesterday called for the establishment of a demilitarised zone around the nuclear power station.

**Kyiv calls for a demilitarised zone around the nuclear power station**

Despite the shelling, the nuclear reactor complex was operating in “normal mode”, Interfax news agency quoted Yevgeniy Balitsky, the Russian-installed head of the local administration, as saying yesterday.

Russian forces captured the plant in Ukraine’s southeast in early March, shortly after Moscow’s February 24 invasion of its neighbour, but it is still run by Ukrainian technicians.

Ukraine blamed Russia for renewed shelling in the area of the plant on Saturday that had damaged three radiation sensors and injured a worker. It was the second reported hit on the plant in as many days, following damage to a power line.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, in a televised address, accused Russia of waging “nuclear terror” that warranted more international sanctions, this time on Moscow’s sprawling nuclear power sector.

Ukraine has said it is planning to conduct a major counter-offensive in the Russian-occupied south, apparently focused on the city of Kherson, west of Zaporizhzhia, and that it has already retaken dozens of villages.

Interfax quoted a Russian-appointed official in Kherson as saying yesterday Ukraine had again shelled the Antonivskiy bridge there, damaging construction equipment and delaying its reopening.

The bridge is one of only two crossing points for Russian forces to territory they have occupied on the western bank of the major Dnipro river in the south, reports Reuters.

Three more die from Covid

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Three more people died from Covid in the 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday.

Besides, 296 people tested positive for the viral infection countrywide during the same period, said a press release of the Directorate General of Health Services.

With the latest count, the total number of fatalities rose to 29,307 and the confirmed cases to 2,007,631.

Yesterday, the positivity rate was 4.99 percent against 5,941 samples tested.

Of the three deceased, one was male. One was aged between 31 and 40, while two others were 51-60 years, said the press release.

1 killed in ‘gunfight’ between Rohingyas

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A Rohingya man was killed in a “gunfight” between two groups of the refugees in Cox’s Bazar’s Teknaf upazila on Sunday evening, said police.

The deceased was Mohammad Ibrahim, 30, of Nayapara Rohingya camp.

Hasan Bari Noor, commander of Armed Police Battalion (APBn) 16, also deputy inspector general (DIG) of police, confirmed the death, reports Prothom Alo.

The APBn officer said two groups of Rohingyas exchanged bullets in the hilly area near Nayapara Rohingya camp on Sunday evening.

On information, police rushed to the spot. Sensing law enforcers’ presence, the criminals fled. Later, police found a bullet-hit man.

He was rushed to Teknaf Upazila Health Complex. As his condition deteriorated, he was taken to Cox’s Bazar Sadar Hospital, where he died, the APBn officer added.

Contacted, Ishfaq Kamal Bappi, doctor of the upazila health complex, said the man was hit by bullets in his chest. Besides, an injury mark was found in his head. As his condition was critical, he was referred to Cox’s Bazar Sadar Hospital.

Two more Turag fire victims die

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Two more people, who were injured two days earlier in a fire following an explosion at a shop in the capital’s Turag area, died at a city hospital yesterday.

Mizanur Rahman, 35, breathed his last around 12:45am and Masum Mia, 38, around 8:00pm at Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery, said resident surgeon SM Aiyub Hossain.

They suffered 95 percent burns on their bodies, he added.

With him, five out of eight injured have died so far.

On Saturday, the explosion took place at a scrap material shop in Kamarpara area when some perfume bottles somehow came in contact with fire. The fire later spread to an adjacent rickshaw garage.

AL ranks irked over hike in fuel prices

FROM PAGE 1

Contacted, the AL leader said he wanted to get the true picture after the government suddenly increased the fuel prices.

“The increase in fuel prices and the subsequent hike in the bus fares have put people in a tight corner. Such a move [the fuel price hike], which was made without any discussions in the party forum has put the party leaders under tremendous pressure,” Zafarullah said.

“The Awami League is a pro-people party and has always stood by the people. The prices should have been hiked in phases, not exorbitantly at one go.”

Zafarullah’s frustration is shared by many leaders -- from the central to grassroots -- of the AL and its allies who think the move has put the ruling party in an awkward situation and will have a negative impact on the next elections slated for late 2023.

On Friday, the government hiked fuel prices by up to 51.7 percent, the highest in the country’s history, throwing the common people -- already struggling to cope with the rising cost of living -- into financial hardship.

The sudden and unprecedented hike has been in discussions among the party leaders at different levels. They said the decision had more to do with bureaucracy rather than politics as they were completely in the dark about it.

But it’s the political leaders who will ultimately have to face the consequences as people always approach them, not others, they said.

Many already complained to them about the area-wise one-to-two hours load shedding that the government enforced across the country from July 19.

Party insiders said they were not happy with the way the government

handled the power crisis as the party’s claim of attaining 100 percent electricity coverage now looks hollow because of the load shedding.

They said the party’s top leaders as well as many ministers were clueless about the highest-ever hike in fuel prices.

As party leaders at different levels are unhappy with the decision and are talking against it in private, they were asked not to criticise the government decision publicly, according to party insiders.

Asked if party leaders were aware of the decision, an AL central committee member suggested paying close attention to party general secretary’s comments on Saturday, a day after the government made the decision.

“The party was unaware of the decision [to hike the price]. Many top leaders didn’t like such a huge rise. You should listen to what Quader Bhai said. You’ll get an idea,” said the party leader seeking anonymity.

Responding to a question on the fuel price hike, AL General Secretary Obaidul Quader at a programme said, “You should first take the energy ministry’s reaction. Why do you need my response? I am not the energy minister. You will have to listen to what reaction the energy minister gives.”

Party leaders believe the sudden hike in fuel prices will make the government unpopular and stir anti-government sentiment. They said it came at a time when they are carrying out activities, keeping the next national election in mind.

They fear if the crisis lingers on, it will be tough for them to woo voters only by showcasing the government’s development work.

Contacted, Kustia district AL President Sadar Uddin Khan declined to comment on the issue, saying the party’s central leaders will talk about it.

Shariful Islam Ramzan, general secretary of Natore district AL, admitted that the price hike would cause “a bit of a problem” for them.

“But I hope we will overcome it,” he said.

The leaders of the components of the AL-led 14-party alliance strongly condemned the “anti-people” decision and demanded its immediate withdrawal.

Talking to The Daily Star, Workers Party President Rashed Khan Menon came down heavily on the government, saying the latest decision was not taken in the interest of the people in any way.

“This was a bureaucratic decision. The government could have never taken such a decision if it had thought about the people,” he said.

Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal President Hasanul Haq Inu said the huge increase in fuel prices was neither a right nor a logical decision, and because of this, the middle class and the low-income people will suffer immensely.

“The issue of fuel price hike was not at all discussed with us. We don’t support this hike,” he said, urging the government to scrap it.

Inu, a key leader of the AL-led combine, further said the government could have withdrawn VAT and duties on fuel import for several months and later adjusted the fuel prices.

Nurur Rahman Selim, presidium member of Gonotantrik Party, a component of the AL-led alliance, voiced anger over the price hike, saying the people will be under huge distress because of it.

“The people, who are already in a crisis due to the rise in prices of essentials in recent months, will face a dire situation due to the price hike,” he said.

Selim thinks the decision to raise fuel prices was not a political one as a pro-people political party cannot do that.

Real picture not reflected

FROM PAGE 1

Language Institute which mentioned the Garo population was 68,210 in 1991 and 84,565 in 2011.

The latest census mentions the number of Santal people to be only 1,29,049. But the community leaders claim their population would not be less than 5 lakh in the whole country as Santal people are scattered in all the northern districts and they also live in Sylhet region.

Banglapedia, the national encyclopedia of Bangladesh, citing an estimate made by Christian missionaries in the 1980s, said the Santal population in northern Bangladesh was over one hundred thousand. According to the 1991 census, the Santal population was over two hundred thousand.

“But our population would not be less than five lakh. Initially, the government changed the name from Adivasi to small ethnic communities, and now they are intentionally reducing the number,” said Rabindra Nath Soren, president of Bangladesh Adivasi Parishad and member of Santal community.

Indigenous leaders and researchers alleged that many of their communities live in the remote areas and the data collectors did not visit their villages and households. As a result, the census did not find the actual population data.

For the first time in the country, the census was conducted using customised Tablet PCs and Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI) method -- a face-to-face data collection method -- and the data of 50 different ethnic communities living across Bangladesh were shown separately in the report.

Philip Gain of Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD), who has long been researching on indigenous people, said the data of this census report is obviously questionable. In 1991, the Santal community was more than two lakh and now the number has been brought down to 1.29 lakh.

The 23 small ethnic communities living in tea estates of Sylhet region

were not properly covered in the census, he added.

Mesbah Kamal, researcher and history professor at Dhaka University, said the government has mentioned 50 ethnic communities -- which is a welcome move.

“But at the same time, the report is not acceptable as it was prepared without engaging ethnic community leaders. It happened due to systematic flaws. I suggest conducting a special population census for small ethnic communities to find out the real number,” he said.

Gaurango Patro, president of Patro Somproday Kaylan Parishad, an association of Patro community, told this correspondent that the census data collectors did not come to their house.

“Then on the last day, I myself called them and gave them information. According to our own survey of 2020, the number of Patro families in Bangladesh was 705 and the total population 3,999 -- males 2076 and females 1,923.”

Yet, the census report says the population of Patro community is 3,100, he added.

Bivuti Bhuson Mahato, head of Bangladesh Bedia Mahato Youth Net, told this newspaper that Bedia Mahato people live in 41 villages in the country. “Our population will be 14,000 to 15,000 according to our own survey. But the census mentioned it’s only 7,207.”

Ridesh Mudi, the head teacher of Malnichhara Tea Garden Primary School in Sylhet, said there are over 500 families of an ethnic group called Kora in Dinajpur and also in 26 tea gardens in Sylhet division.

“Our population would be around 2,000. But the census shows only 816.”

Parimal Singh Baraik, president of Cha Jonogosthi Adivasi Front, said 83 Gurkha families, popularly known as Nepalis, live in Bandarban and in tea gardens of Sylhet, Moulvibazar and Habiganj.

“But in the 2022 census, the Gurkha population is only 100.”

Pius Nanuar, a Kharia social activist who conducted a study on

the population of his community in early 2020, told this correspondent that they found around 5,700 Kharia people in 41 villages of Sylhet division.

But in the 2022 census, the Kharia population is only 3,099. “No one came to count me or take any information about me.”

Ram Papangg, who took part in a field-level population survey in Kormodha Union in Moulvibazar’s Kulaura upazila, said only three villages in remote areas were not surveyed. “Later, the people of indigenous communities complained. Then on the last day, I went and conduct the survey.”

Ripon Banerjee, population census supervisor of Rajghat union in Sreemangal, said some data collectors did not use the “tribal option” on their devices to “avoid trouble”.

Dipankar Roy, technical head of the latest census project, said a census is not an estimation. “Activists may say a lot of things; they may estimate any number at will. But the census report is based on facts and figures,” he added.

“Many estimated that the total population of the country would be 18 crore or 20 crore, but the census did not reflect that. We found the population 16.51 crore.”

**One suspect**

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Seven of the arrestees are garment employees and the rest are helpers of different buses. They had been committing robberies under the guise of the professions and would go into hiding for days soon after.

Just one female passenger spoke out about the rape but the arrestees told Rab that they had sexually abused more than one female passenger inside the Tangail bus.

Investigators will look into whether anyone woman was raped, Moin said.

According to Rab, 13 members of the gang took part in the bus robbery, which saw them mug 20 mobile phones from passengers. Of them, three were arrested by district police earlier.