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I never asked for a high remuneration

Big hike in gas prices for power plants, industry

ASIFUR RAHMAN

The government yesterday raised the retail price of gas by 14.5 percent to 178.9 percent for industries, power plants and commercial establishments, who together account for 78 percent of gas use in Bangladesh, as it looks to lessen its unsustainable subsidy burden amid a narrow fiscal space.

The development is set to fuel a fresh round of inflation, which declined for the fourth straight month in December last year.

From next month, the price of gas used for power generation will be Tk 14 for each cubic meter, up 178.9 percent from the existing rate, as per the gazette notification from the ministry of power, energy and mineral resources.

For captive power plants and industries, gas will cost Tk 30 per cubic meter.

That would be a 150 percent hike for large industries, 154.7 percent for medium industries and 178.3 percent for small and cottage industries. For captive power plants, it would be an increase of 87.5 percent.

Commercial establishments like hotels and restaurants will have to pay Tk 30.50 per unit, up 14.5 percent from the existing rate.

The tariff for households, fertiliser production, CNG-run vehicles and tea gardens will remain unchanged.

The gas price hike was necessary as the government's subsidy burden increased enormously, said Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh.

USER	EXISTING PRICE (Tk per cubic metre)	NEW PRICE (Tk per cubic metre)	INCREASE (in %)
Electricity (Govt, IPP, rental plants)	5.02	14.00	178.88
Captive power (Small, commercial power plants)	16.00	30.00	87.5
Industries			
Large	11.98	30.00	150.41
Medium	11.78	30.00	154.66
Small, cottage, others	10.78	30.00	178.29
Commercial (Hotels, restaurants)	26.64	30.50	14.49
PRICE UNCHANGED: FERTILISER FACTORIES, TEA INDUSTRY, CNG, HOUSEHOLDS			

"But the government put all the burden on industries. It was an unbalanced decision -- it needs to be revised," he added.

With the new decision, the subsidy burden will be reduced but it will not be zero, Nasrul Hamid, the state minister for power, energy and mineral resources, told The Daily Star.

"We had several meetings with the businessmen and they always said that they need uninterrupted gas supply and they would be able to pay Tk 25 per unit of gas. But we calculated that if we fix it at Tk 25, the subsidy burden will not come down significantly. So, we fixed it at Tk 30."

If gas can be supplied to the gas-fired power plants, it would not be necessary to keep the costly diesel-fired plants running, he said. "That's why we made the decision."

At least 29 gas-fired power plants are not getting gas to produce electricity as per their capacity of 6,001 megawatts.

Yesterday, 14 remained shut for want of gas, while the remaining 15 produced only 2,205 MW of electricity, according to the data of Power Grid Company of Bangladesh.

Asked whether the price hike would ensure uninterrupted gas supply, Hamid said: "That will be a challenge. We will increase the supply by importing LNG, but how much we will be able to import remains to be seen."

Currently, the spot market price for gas is \$23 per million British thermal unit (MMbtu) and it would cost \$27-30 to import the liquefied natural gas cargo, according to Hamid.

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Construction of the Dhaka Elevated Expressway is going on in full swing. The 47km expressway is being built between Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport and Kutubkhali on Dhaka-Chattogram highway. The photo was taken in the capital's Kuril area on Sunday.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

FIXING ENERGY PRICES

Govt curtails BERC's power as regulator

ASIFUR RAHMAN

Due to government interventions, the independent oversight of the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission is being compromised, crippling its ability to ensure transparency in the sector, energy at a reasonable cost, and consumers' interest protection.

Following public hearings and a quasi-judiciary process, the BERC determines tariffs, issues licences, and oversees dispute settlement in the power and energy sector.

But bypassing the BERC, the government yesterday hiked gas prices for factories, power plants, and for hotels and restaurants.

The new prices, which are 14.49 percent to 178.88 percent higher, will be effective from next month.

Last Thursday, the government hiked the power price for consumers by 5 percent, again circumventing the BERC.

The government used a recent amendment to the BERC Act-2003 that allows it to fix energy prices under "special circumstances".

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NCTB TEXTBOOKS

Never-ending cycle of controversies

MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR and ARAFAT RAHAMAN

The National Curriculum and Textbook Board has been stuck in the loop of controversies centring on school textbooks with academics and some NCTB officials blaming it on the negligence of writers and editors, insufficient training and lack of serious punishment for blunders.

In 2013, textbooks contained some gross mistakes and the authorities could hardly change things since then as this year's books too were not error-free.

There is also an allegation of plagiarism in one of the textbooks distributed free among the students in line with the fresh curriculum introduced on the first day of this year.

But no punishment has been handed to any writer or editor for the mistakes -- only visible action was transferring a few NCTB officials or making them OSD.

Apart from the mistakes, the

board invited huge criticism by omitting textbook contents mostly written by non-Muslim authors in 2017, giving in to the demands of Hefazat-e-Islam, a Qawmi madrasa-based Islamist outfit.

The board did not consider bringing back the write-ups to date, ignoring the call of progressive and secular groups and individuals.

"The NCTB has failed to break the cycle of controversy because it hardly pays heed to criticism over the mistakes in textbooks," renowned educationist and Dhaka University Professor Emeritus Serajul Islam Choudhury told The Daily Star yesterday.

"We don't find such debates over English medium or madrasa books. But we see it in the case of the Bangla medium, which is our mainstream... They [the authorities] also showed the tendency to compromise by dropping contents following demands of Hefajat."

He said there was no justification for accepting the demands of Hefajat, and the write-ups dropped

from textbooks in 2017 should have been brought back already.

MISTAKES AND PLAGIARISM

The NCTB introduced new textbooks under the new curriculum for class I, VI and VII this year. This newspaper analysed the English book for class VI and found several mistakes.

For example, in chapter two, there is a poem titled "Little Things" but there was no mention of the poet, Julia Abigail Fletcher Carney.

On page 17, there was a spelling mistake -- "ages" became "agesz" while on page 82, "conversion" was in place of "conversation".

There are also grammatical errors. For example, on page 52, a situation was described where a girl was seen helping a female friend. But in the following sentence, the pronoun "his" was used instead of "her".

There are also several errors in Bangla instructions in the book -- like mistakes in sentence-making and misspellings.

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BANGLADESH NAT'L POLLS

EU keen on sending observers

Says visiting delegation

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The European Union is interested in sending polls observers for Bangladesh's next general election.

Ambassador Charles Whiteley, head of the 11-member EU delegation visiting Bangladesh, said this after a meeting with Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibur Awal yesterday.

"We are very heartened by the positive comments by the Bangladesh authorities about welcoming foreign observers," he told reporters.

Whiteley said they discussed a wide range of issues on preparation for the next polls.

Everybody wants a participatory, peaceful, and fair election and that is in everybody's interest, he added.

Meanwhile, the CEC yesterday said there were still some disagreements between political parties on some issues and the atmosphere was not congenial yet for polls.

He made this comment in reply to a query from journalists after the meeting with the EU delegation at the Election

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A motorbike burning on Bhogra Bypass Road in Gazipur city yesterday morning. Following the death of a trader allegedly in police torture, locals blocked the road and vandalised several vehicles. Police and the demonstrators also chased each other.

PHOTO: ABU BAKAR SIDDIQUE AKAND

Gazipur trader dies as 'cops torture him in custody'

Locals go on rampage, block roads; 2 ASIs closed

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gazipur

At least 12 people, including two cops, were injured as a mob clashed with police in Gazipur city's Bhogra bypass area yesterday morning over the death of a trader allegedly due to torture in police custody.

The mob vandalised at least 20 vehicles, torched two motorbikes, and blocked the Dhaka-Mymensingh and Joydevpur-Jamalpur highways for about one and a half hours from around 10:00am.

The deceased: Md Rabiul Islam, 38, used to run a tailoring accessories shop in Pearabagan of Bhogra.

Mahidul Islam, the victim's younger brother, and other family members told The Daily Star that police picked up

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Rabiul Islam